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Whatua te Muka Tāngata: Indigenous Cloak-Making as a Site of Healing and Resistance

Kim Penetito and Hinekura Smith

Abstract

This article explores a collaborative arts-research exchange between Māori and Aboriginal women cloak-makers, positioning traditional cloaking practices as powerful sites of healing, resistance and cultural regeneration. Grounded in Kaupapa Māori and Whatuora (H. Smith, 2017; 2019) methodologies, the article weaves together the experiences of Māori weavers and Aboriginal possum-skin cloak-makers who came together on each other's lands to share, learn and co-create. Through reciprocal exchange and community-engaged practice, three Aboriginal women came to wānanga in Aotearoa in April 2024, with two Māori women travelling to Victoria in Australia in the following month to experience their learning circles. The women revitalised intergenerational knowledge systems, language and creative pedagogies grounded in Indigenous maternities. Cloak-making processes serve not only as a tangible act of creation but as a metaphor for the binding of generations, reconnection to whenua (land), and reclamation of identity. The culminating collaborative cloak, *Kahu–Kooramookyan*, embodies the cultural narratives, relational ethics and artistic expressions that resonate across Māori and Aboriginal epistemologies. This article forwards cloaking as an artivism – activist arts practice – that nurtures Indigenous wellbeing and acts as a decolonising intervention, reconnecting communities through shared values of aroha, reciprocity and resistance. As ancestral knowledge is reactivated through hands, fibres and ceremony, cloak-making emerges as an educational, spiritual and political act of Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence.

Introduction

Cloak-making is an expression of identity and belonging for many different cultures. An initial encounter between two Indigenous women artists at an international arts-research exchange between Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and Canada, sponsored by the University of Regina in April 2023, was the impetus for the coming together of two communities on each other's homelands. These women were Dr Vicki Couzens, a Keeray Wooroong mother and grandmother renowned as an artist and knowledge holder in possum-skin cloak revitalisation, and for her work in Victoria, Australia, in the language reclamation and revival of her Gunditjmara mother tongue, and Dr Hinekura Smith, a Te Rarawa mother, weaver, academic leader and researcher. Hinekura is also active in growing communities of practice in whatu kākahu (cloak-making) in Aotearoa. This article recounts the storying shared between two Māori women cloak-makers and a family of Aboriginal women who have led the reclamation of traditional possum-skin cloak-making in their community. It is an account of how the culturally generative practice and pedagogy embedded in the customary garments that Māori and Aboriginal mothers create encourages positive Indigenous identities and reconnects to the distinctive cultural artistry of whatu kākahu (Māori woven cloaks) and possum-skin cloaking. Our storytelling reflects on the impacts of colonisation and lays bare the Indigenous experiences of cultural decimation on both sides of the Tasman Sea to contextualise the healing our very different cloak-making practices enable.

This article begins by laying out the research context of this creative Māori–Aboriginal women's collaboration. Vicki brought into this collaboration her sister-in-law and renowned possum-skin artist Gina Bundle (Djiringaanj Walbunja) and her niece Tarryn Love, who is an emerging artist, curator and producer. Hinekura partnered with kaiwhatu (weaver) and co-researcher Kim Penetito (Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Tamaterā). Our foundational methodologies are then presented, and the voices of the Māori women in the project tell of the appreciation they formulated from the trading of insights and cultural subtleties of cloak-making. Finally, we weave together our thinking around Māori and Aboriginal maternities expressed through the traditional garments we cloak our children in, to shine a light on our cloak-making communities of practice as significant knowledge-creation sites that support wellbeing.

Mob visit to Aotearoa, visitors hosted by kaiwhatu Kim (left) and Hinekura (right): Tarryn Love, Vicki Couzens and Gina Bundle. Ngā Wai a Te Tūī, Unitec, Auckland, 8 April 2024.

The important role of Indigenous maternities

Globally, Indigenous mothers and grandmothers (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua & Ka'ōpua, 2007; Green & Beckwith, 2009; Jenkins & Mountain Harte, 2011; Lamphere, 2007) play a critical role in nurturing and restor(y)ing positive cultural identities for our children as we reclaim and re-weave threads of language, culture and identity frayed by colonisation (H. Smith, 2017; 2020). As collaborative creative researchers, we identify as Aboriginal and Māori women, as mothers, grandmothers, daughters, nieces, aunties, sisters and grandchildren. As Māori and Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers, we literally cloak our children in the culturally storied cloaks we make, and as we do so, we metaphorically cloak them in our aroha (broad notions of love) and aspirations to live culturally well lives. Weaving multiple threads of decolonising theory, embodied arts praxis and Indigenous maternities, this arts-research and community exchange revealed connections between our practices, aspirations and activism through the traditional garments we create. Both Māori cloaks and Aboriginal possum-skin cloaks pass on language, knowledge, aroha, intergenerational stories and positive cultural identity as elements of wellbeing.

Our experience as cloak-makers tells us that our practices create healing spaces in our respective communities. Our traditionally made, culturally embodied garments hold memory within their fibres in ways that protect and nurture (H. Smith, 2017). The transmission of the artistry, story, language and spirit of ancestors is unlocked as the teaching and learning threads of a customary practice are unravelled and bound together again. The women in this research collaboration collectively facilitate these reconnections to culture

through communities of practice that have been nurtured over many years in our communities in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and in rural Victoria, Australia. In these community healing spaces we hear language emerge, we see creative storying flow, and we observe kinship connections develop. We watch confidence rise to coach others, we feel the warmth of ancestor approval as the fingers become nimble, and we bask in the exchange of knowing that is shared intergenerationally. As our hands weave, hearts and minds are using the same movements and intentions enacted by our ancestors. By bringing 'old' ways of knowing and doing into our contemporary lived experiences, we bring our ancestors back into being to sit alongside us, as we re-weave threads of our ourselves that colonisation frayed but could never sever.

Regenerating the language of our arts practice is as important as the practice itself. Māori scholar Taina Pohatu reminds us of the vast amount of knowledge held within language, and warns that "an unwillingness to properly value the potential held within Māori bodies of knowledge, deposited by generations past into the 'library of te reo', will have the effect of limiting our visions, horizons, and so expectations" (Pohatu & Pohatu, 2011, p. 3). For example, the Māori word kahu means both woven cloak and the maternal amniotic sac that nurtures our children in utero (H. Smith, 2017), and whenu, a contraction of the term whenua, are the many strands or vertical warp threads that make up the body of a kākahu (H. Smith, 2017), and can be described dualistically as both placenta and land – one is the essential connector that sustains the child within the mother's womb while the other continues to nurture the child once they are born (Maihi, 2011).

Kooramookyan, a regional word for possum-skin cloaks, like Māori kākahu, are significant cultural garments, used in the everyday nurturing and care of families – to carry babies, to sleep in; they hold story of kin, Country and belonging; cloaks are ceremonial, worn as identifiers of kinship and belonging; women use cloaks to drum in ceremony; and finally you are buried in your cloak to continue the journey in the life–birth–death cycle, returning to our ancestors (V. Couzens, personal communication, 5 April 2024). While this group of five artist–researcher–teacher women have written about the transformative work of teaching cloak-making in their own Māori and Aboriginal communities, this on-country research exchange was a unique opportunity to work together and make cloaks on each other's country and in community.

By walking the whenua and sitting with our Indigenous whanaunga (relatives) on each of our own lands, we learn from each other's ways of honouring culture and respectfully exchanging knowledges. By weaving together Māori and Aboriginal artforms for wellbeing and healing, we have deepened our connection as women artist–researcher–teachers who use our practice to cloak our children and grandchildren in culturally generative, well ways of being fully Indigenous in their worlds.

In April of 2024, two Māori women kaiwhatu (weavers) hosted three Aboriginal women cloak-making artists in Aotearoa, the exchange supported by the International Teaching Arts Collective (ITAC). Our research proposal was regarded as a unique proposition to enable an exchange of cultural knowledge, practice and relationship. Led by the two wāhine Māori authors of this article,

the project's research methodology and relationality was underpinned by Kaupapa Māori principles, and ethics approval was gained to gather qualitative voices and participant images. The research outputs of the exchange include this article and a conference presentation at the Indigenous Teaching Artists Conference held in Tāmaki Makaurau in November 2024. Most powerful to the exchange was the relationship built between the authors and the Aboriginal women with whom we had the pleasure of sharing knowledge. The Aboriginal women from Victoria, Australia, are kin to each other and represented three generations. The mokopuna (grandchild) that accompanied them is from Aboriginal and Ngāti Porou lineage, and came to meet her whānau on their homelands for the first time. They were invited to and participated in a whatu wānanga (community of practice), bringing other kaiwhatu alongside to sit with them to share their weaving journeys and language revitalisation struggle.

The reciprocal exchange saw the two Māori authors of this article visit Gunditjmara Country, northwest of Melbourne, in May 2024. We were accompanied by a husband and a daughter, travelling together as whānau (kinship group). Whanaungatanga is about strengthening connection and creating and maintaining relationships. We exercised whakawhanaungatanga by sitting with the people of the land, sharing breath, sharing customs and honouring each other. Having our whānau be present with us and experiencing the exchange of other Indigenous ways of being is a natural way of deepening the relationship. Bringing to the collective the many dimensions of who and what make an individual stand strong in their identity meant sharing our mokopuna (descendants), our kin, our elders, aunties, sisters, daughters, fathers and husbands.

Our tikanga, or cultural ethics, approach to this collaboration is as important, if not more important, than the general research ethics that are required to conduct research. Our research relationality has been guided by tika, pono and aroha – that is, doing things right, doing things with good intent, and doing things with deep respect. We are mindful these are the core principles of building and maintaining relationships, and the foundations of achieving social justice. Reciprocating the experience as manuhiri (visitors on foreign soil) and tangata whenua (people of the host lands) facilitated the foundations of a meaningful learning journey and genuinely respectful relationship. Rituals of engagement for both visits followed the cultural protocols of the hosts – pōwhiri (welcoming ceremony) in Tāmaki Makaurau, and a smoking ceremony on Country at Framlington Aboriginal Trust, Warrnambool, Victoria. This tikanga led to opportunities for deepening our relationship and connection with each other.

Mana motuhake is the ability for a person or persons to stand rightfully in their authority, own their space and determine their independence. It is a place Indigenous people never abandoned, but were stripped of. Our cultural exchange enabled us to support another Indigenous people's expression of mana motuhake by being invited to walk with them on Country and experience their distinctive expressions of self-determination. We had the opportunity to listen, to share and to better understand each other's creative cultural expressions. Walking Country in this way meant being intentional in honouring our Indigenous relations' customs by tuning in to mother-tongue language and the language that reverberated on Country.

What follows are reflections from the Māori contingent. We share our experiences, observations and visceral moments that stirred familiar values, such as connection to land, stories of cruelty administered through colonisation, and the 'artivist' ways with which we are healing colonial trauma with and for our respective communities. We articulate our gratitude and admiration for our sisters' cultural footprint on their lands and celebrate how toi continues to provide an outlet for truth-telling, while also energising the reclamation of ancient weaving practices for Indigenous people. Cloak-making for Māori and Aboriginal communities is the activism of revitalising the once-endangered identity symbols of Māori and Aboriginal cloak-making as a powerful site of social justice and Indigenous community wellbeing.

Kaupapa Māori

Kaupapa Māori is the methodological approach that underpins this research alongside Hinekura Smith's (2017; 2020; 2021; 2022) Whatuora methodology, a theorised methodology drawn from traditional Māori arts practice. Articulated by Tuakana (Tuki) Nepe (1991), Kaupapa Māori (KM) is a distinctive cultural epistemology and conceptualisation of Māori knowledge. In the mid-1980s eminent Māori scholars Graham Hingangaroa Smith and Linda Tuhiwai Smith were parents and critical drivers of a groundswell of Māori families who established the Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM) total-immersion Māori schooling option (G. H. Smith, 2015; G. H. Smith & L. T. Smith, 1990). This powerful parent-collective was united in opposition to an education system failing Māori children in Aotearoa (L. T. Smith, 2006). Nepe led this resistance alongside other passionate and assertive Māori educators from the community and academy. Community wānanga (learning forums) assisted whānau Māori (Māori families) to unpack what success looked like for Māori, and revealed what knowledge Māori valued in order for their tamariki (children) to succeed in the world.

Kura Kaupapa Māori began as a political initiative established to interrupt and change the education system in Aotearoa (G. H. Smith, 2015). It is an educational model that reclaims the customs, practices and aspirations of Māori, taught in a Māori-language immersion environment, and remains grounded in ngā taonga tuku iho (the teachings of our forebears); a confidence in cultural identity (to stand tall as Māori); a command of Māori language and customary practices; and a return to traditional learning pedagogies drawn from bodies of Māori knowledge. The desire was to recreate the intellect, determination, drive and integrity of their ancestors in their time. Parents and educationalists together wrote an entirely new curriculum to meet these aspirations. Kura Kaupapa Māori was launched in 1985 and continues to thrive as an education pathway for tamāriki Māori and their whānau to live, learn and flourish as Māori.

Kura Kaupapa Māori is the antithesis of Western education models, designed to challenge and transform the existing unequal power relations for Māori in education. Prior to the introduction of Kura Kaupapa Māori as an

educational option, generations of Maōri learners were indoctrinated through the state's education system and assimilated into Western ideologies of language, customs, etiquette, beliefs and social norms. Kura Kaupapa Māori is the embodiment of the theoretical foundations of Kaupapa Māori. From the experience of developing Kura Kaupapa Māori and mobilising whānau Māori to recreate an education pathway for their children's right to their cultural identity, academic leadership has, since the late 1980s, been theorising Kaupapa Māori as a distinct Indigenous approach to research and, furthermore, a decolonising methodology (G. H. Smith, 1997). Explaining the Kaupapa Māori foundations and their activation in the education arena illustrates the extent of Kaupapa Māori as a model of "resistance to exclusion" (L. T. Smith, 2006, p. 249). This exclusion is completely relatable to our Aboriginal sisters who are artivists, invested in reigniting their language and employing creative strategies to restore a command of their mother tongue in their community, and for their family and descendants.

In the context of Indigenous methodologies, Kaupapa Māori has shaped an approach that is now being applied to research, community development, social services provision, justice, health and education to ensure that any strategies designed to promote Māori wellbeing are Māori centred, Māori driven and Māori led. Kaupapa Māori is the lived experience of Māori, and must be positively transformative for Māori for it to be rightly identified as Kaupapa Māori. Graham Smith (1997) describes this best, as the practice and philosophy of living a culturally informed Māori life.

The transforming potential for Māori to engage with other Indigenous peoples in expressions of activism is not new to global communities of Indigeneity (L. T. Smith, 1999). Movement across the traditional homelands to reclaim cultural ways of being and reinstate customary practices as ongoing resistance to colonisation and imperialism is common to Indigenous people, not only to reclaim self-determination but also to heal. Cloak-making is another site for intergenerational transmission of intrinsic storying, language and ways of being. It is a space that supports the rebuilding of language and the passing of knowledge and ways of knowing and doing. The benefits for Māori and Aboriginal people alike are the strengthening of these networks of whanaungatanga (relationships) and, consequently, the ongoing opportunities to reciprocate allegiances to advance creative avenues of self-determination.

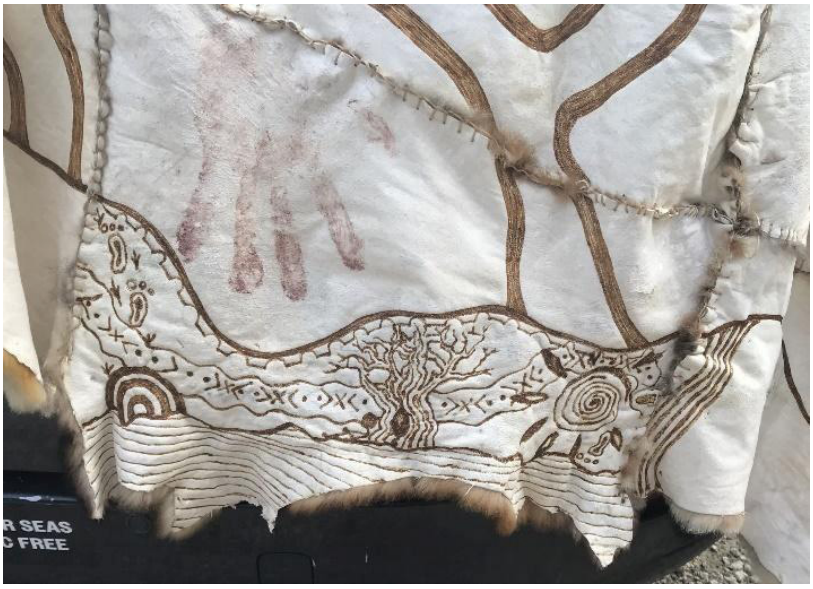
Cloak-making methodology

The methodology of cloak-making for both groups of Indigenous weavers is the connection of people to place, and of cultural identity to the practices of our ancestors (Campbell, 2019; Kovach, 2009). It is neatly aligned to a long historical tradition of crafting methods from different societies and eras that are recognised as covert activism, resisting, examining and challenging contemporary issues and politics (Fitzpatrick & Reilly, 2019). As Indigenous women, we are familiar with the stripping of customary practices that were sites of cultural wellbeing through the actions of colonisation (H. Smith,

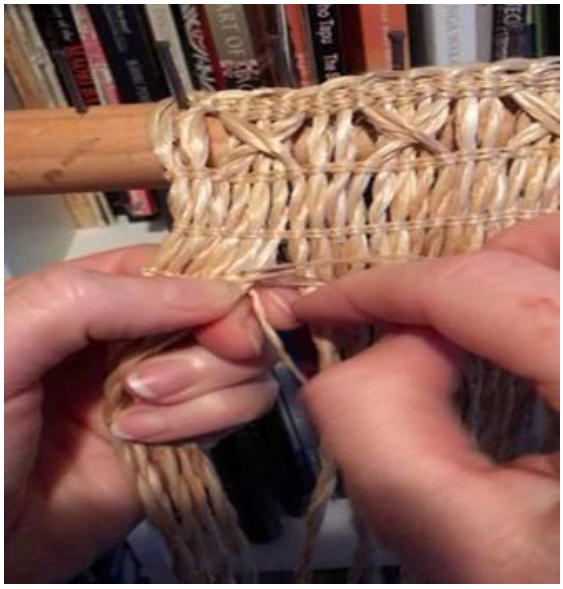
2017; 2022; 2023). Cloak-making is an active reclamation of our histories and Indigenous narratives that are revealed and visible in the construction of cloaks (H. Smith, 2017; 2021; 2023).

The cloak-making space attracts women seeking out kinship circles to connect to Māori language and knowledge, to reassert their creative minds, and to remember and regenerate stories from their grandmothers and great-grandmothers (H. Smith, 2020). It is not solely a women's tradition; however, women are asserting the space as another avenue for their voices to be heard and their stories told. The continuous binding together of the voices of ancestors is achieved through imagery and the retelling of stories using colour, textures, natural fibres and contemporary materials, hand-woven with loving intention. This arts-research exchange between Māori and Aboriginal cloak-making women consciously wove together with love the jagged edges of different generational experiences of knowing, and in doing so engaged in the ongoing process of healing trauma in our changing cultural landscapes.

The revival of cultural making-spaces has revitalised the teaching and learning of customary cloak-making, where time, laughter and tears breathe life into traditions of storytelling through the creative practice of cloak-making. The stories come from our hearts' histories of both love and pain, and they are shared in the engraving of pictures into hides and stitching together of pelts. Cloak-making is another vehicle that strengthens the movement for Indigenous peoples to recover from generations of mourning and resurrect ancestral muscle-memory in practices that make us feel whole again. It is the embedding and restoring of our ways of being to ensure the longevity of our practices for our grandchildren (Couzens & Darroch, 2012).



Designs on the cloak made by Yaraan Couzens-Bundle.



Whatu (finger weaving) with muka (flax fibre).

Weaving on Country: Keeray Woorrong–Gunditjmara

Waerea ki runga
Waerea ki raro
Waerea ki waho
Waerea ki roto
Waerea ki waengarahi i a
Ranginui e tū iho nei i a
Papatūānuku e takoto ake nei
Waerea ai te ara
Waerea ai te ara tika
Waerea ai te huarahi
Waerea ai te huarahi pai
Waerea ai ōu nā whakaaro o te hinengaro
Waerea ai te ngākau
Waerea ai te wairua
Waerea ai te tinana
Whaia te mātauranga kia mārama, kia mārama pū, kia rangipūaho
Kia whai take ngā mahi katoa
Kia tauaru te ara tika
Kia whaiwhai te huarahi pai
Kia mauri tau ai te whatumanawa
Uhi, wero, tau mai te mauri
Haumi e, hui e, tāiki e!

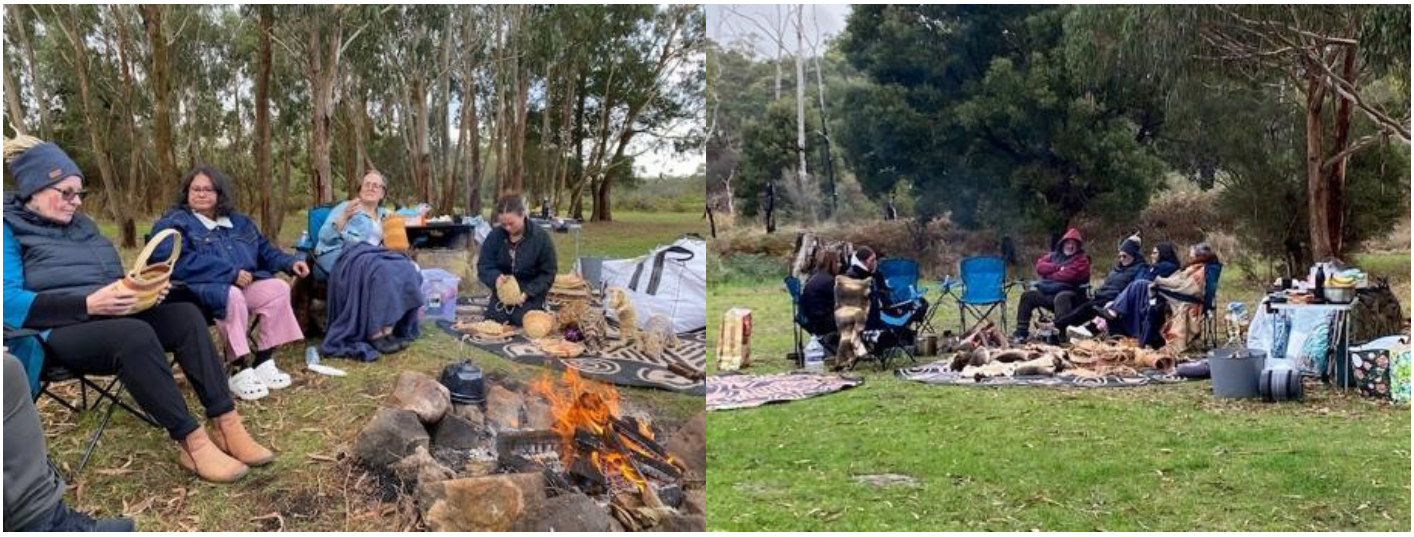
Waerea is a protective incantation. This waerea was gifted by Tui Ranapiri-Ransfield to help guide us as Māori women to walk the lands of our whanaunga on Te Whenua Moemoea (Australia) in a return visit. It acknowledges the many different elements of spirit, person and place. It announces the purpose of our visit and seeks safe passage to enter unfamiliar lands in search of new learnings and shared understanding. It encourages us to travel with an open heart and mind and sit humbly together in a state of consciousness. This is an account of our time with our mob hosts.

The creation stories for the Gunditjmara begin with Bunjil, the eagle. We are privileged to observe several Bunjil, wedgetail eagle, pairs that hover above us on the fleeting highways as we travel the territory of the Gunditjmara. We experience many tohu (signs) during our time as we listen to Country, on these lands. A mammoth investment of time from the Gunditjmara people to narrate their own histories and honour their storytellers is evident from the different places we encountered. Their voices are in public viewing-spaces and plaques that tell their pūrākau (narratives) and acknowledge their totems. They have reclaimed the visibility of their people as the owners of this territory, through what they call ‘truth telling’.

In our journey to explore the shared knowledge of cloak-making with our sisters in Australia, we needed to be resolute about how this exchange would benefit our people here in Aotearoa. Our grounding in Kaupapa Māori mapped

out for us an appreciation of mana motuhake (our own cultural uniqueness) and responsibility to be both generous with our knowledge, and protective of our knowledge. It guided us to extend manaakitanga (hospitality) and be humble in receiving manaaki (care). Investing in whanaungatanga would be important in fulfilling the rituals of engagement when we stepped onto each other's land and into each other's spiritual spaces. We took our own spiritual cloaks to guard ourselves, and we swaddled our guests in karakia (protective incantations).

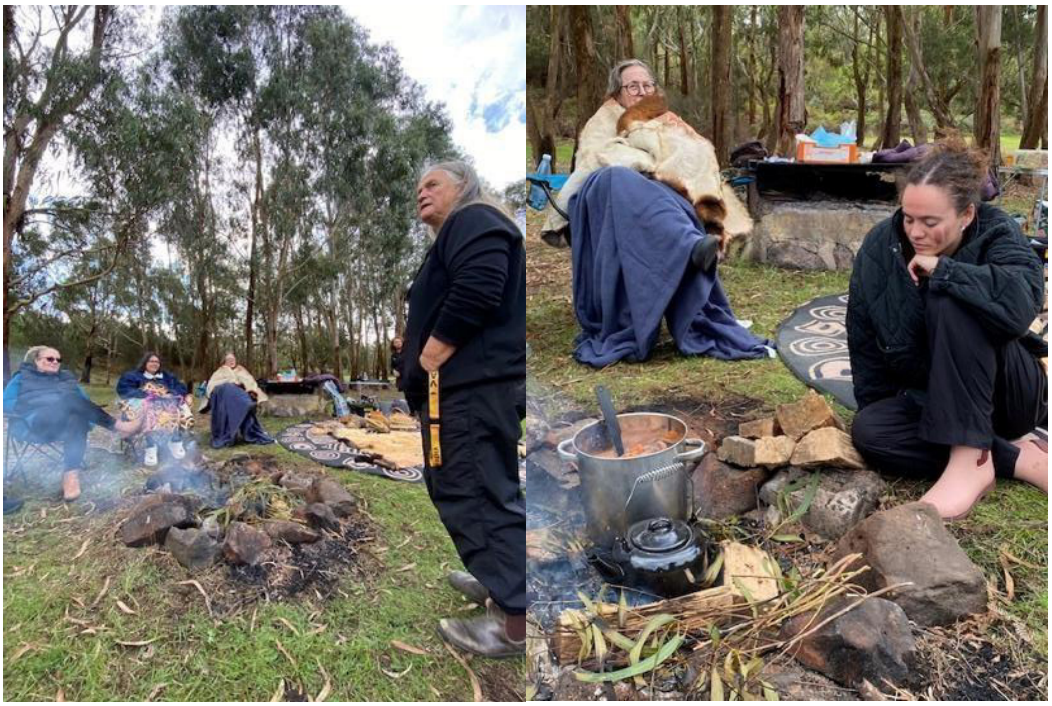
We are introduced to the landscapes of the Gunditjmara – vast open plains, long straight highways, wind turbines, rock-fenced farmlands, lines of gum trees with spindly trunks at attention, volcanic rings of maunga (mountains) in the far distance, townships that mirror those of provincial Aotearoa. Wide roads with singed earth edges from the controlled burning that is a common practice here to replenish new life. We hear about landmarks of significance that have documented histories of the lands below, wetlands and huge bodies of water with roads across them like planks of wood. We see and hear birds of colour who vocally make their presence known, koala come to greet us in nearby gum trees, and ash-compressed pancaked walls tell thousands of years of existence lining a crater that now bears an ecosystem of abundance. We gaze at waterfalls, steep-walled sea sides and natural protected places where information about the wildlife is displayed and customary histories narrated. We marvel at massive inlets of water that look like lakes but are the sea, miles inland from the horizon of their origin. We are told about battles and about the creation stories of maunga and water. We learn about different plant and animal life and their importance to the people of this whenua. We are charmed by red sunsets and look out over the Southern Ocean, where whales migrate up the coast. We hear about colonial oppression, we see its presence in the buildings, we feel its impact when we enter reclaimed spaces for Blak fella creative expression, and we are led proudly to safe places belonging to tangata whenua (Indigenous people of the land).



Welcome to community smoking ceremony, Gunditjmara lands, Framlington Mission Station, 10 May 2024.

Framlington Mission Station is a reconciliation space for the Gunditjmara community, governed by their own Aboriginal Trust. It is a site of deep importance for our hosts. It is their Country for ceremony, for hunting, for storytelling. The Mission site has a history of being a trading post, but also holds horrific stories of genocide where the local Indigenous people were given rotten or contaminated food supplies and given blankets infested with disease in another attempt to erase their existence and smooth the way for settler land acquisition. Today it is in the hands of the rightful guardians of the lands – always was, always will be Aboriginal land. They are still here, and it is the Gunditjmara place of connection.

Note: Hikoi i te whenua. Stepping onto each other's whenua and being introduced to landmarks of immense importance (mountains, waterways, sacred sites) is an honour. Listening to the sounds of the waterways, the bush, the birds, trees and animal life grows a better understanding of the tangata whenua (the people of the land) and the environment their ancestors have lived in. All senses are heightened. We inhale the fragrances of plant life and learn to identify natural fibres growing on the land used for weaving. We harvest plants to make rongoā (healing balms). We taste the sea salt in the wind, and we inhale the eucalyptus on the fire. We sit in circles, we weave and we talk. This is 'hīkoi i te whenua' – to walk the land and feel the place that has grown generations of our people.



Gunditjmara traditional lands, 10 May 2024.

We sat on Country with our hosts and alongside their grandchildren, where fire sites are accessible for ceremony. The river lazily meanders by the site. We circle the firepit, inhale the smoke of branches of eucalyptus leaves and envelop ourselves in the veil of smoke – he pure (a cleansing). Our faces are marked with red ochre, downward stripes on the women and horizontal on

the men. Our hosts drum on possum skins and impart their own words of welcome in a chant to the beat of talking sticks. We are graciously hosted, fed with story to fill our hearts and food cooked on the fire to fill our bellies. The smoke billows and we breathe it in. It is healing, and it is bringing the spirits of the mob ancestors to welcome us to Country. We are present, we are blessed, we are honoured.

Note: Kaitahi. Eating together for both cultures is part of bonding. We proudly serve up the delicacies of the land (kangaroo, wallaby, venison, crocodile, johnny cakes). We talk, we laugh and cry, and while we keep the puku (belly) fed, we are strengthening our kinship bonds.

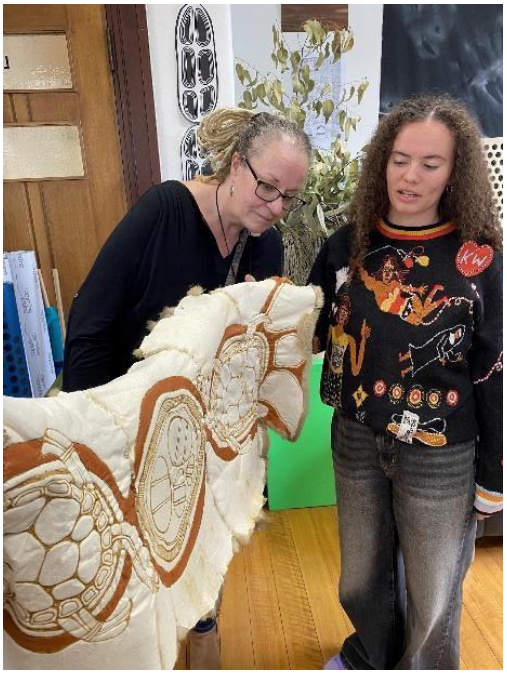
Cloak-making is an intervention to hold space for intergenerational learning of cultural practices. It is a conduit for women's voices to be expressed. It strengthens mob (family) histories and the stitching together of bites of language that remain among the knowledge holders. In Victoria alone there are 44 languages and only a handful of people with any fluency to teach their language (Couzens, 2017). With this challenge it is encouraging to know that cloak-making is another site for revitalising language and reawakening rituals of ceremony to celebrate new life, achievement and death with the wearing and gifting of cloaks.

Threads that bind – wrapped in love

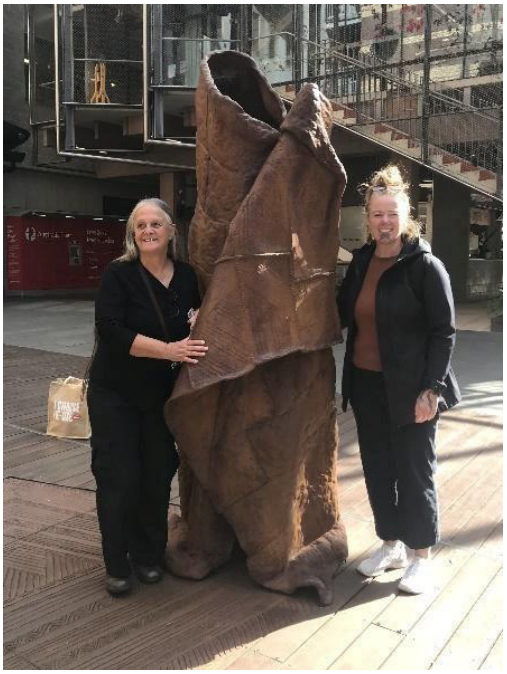
What we learn in our time with our sisters are the synergies as Indigenous women. Our connections to taiao (the environment), to whenua (land) and to place are inherent to our cultures. The role of women to nurture the transmission of oral traditions and customary practices is central to both cultures. We also recognise there are distinctive and unique variations in language, belief systems and kawa (protocols) from mob to mob, and tribe to tribe.

In both Aotearoa and Te Whenua Moemoea (Australia) we made space for the creative exchange of our weaving practices. We were able to touch different textures and natural resources, and to understand the symbolism and practicalities of the different mediums used to create cloaks. We visited a powerful Aboriginal exhibition on permanent display at Melbourne Museum, where our eyes were opened to our hosts' world of toi (arts) through historical and contemporary textile art and design. Touch is another sense that knits us closer as we talk more about tradition, gain deeper meaning around materials used, and retrieve our practices of storytelling. We learn the power of cloaking-making imagery that assists us to assert our voices without words.

The Gunditjmara women we spent time with have common cultural aspirations to honour the storytelling practices of their ancestors (Couzens, 2017; H. Smith, 2019). They use different mediums to piece together snippets of language and memories of place and traditions, to snuff out overwhelming narratives of trauma, pain, anger and loss. As we are dealing with our own



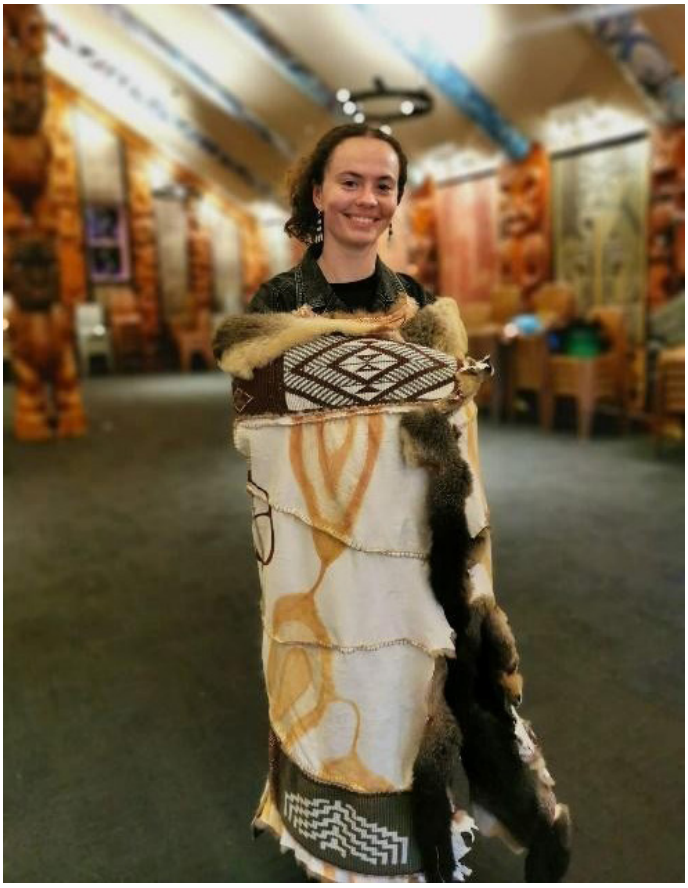
Kim Penetito and Tarryn Love, Platform Arts studio, Geelong, Victoria, 9 May 2024.



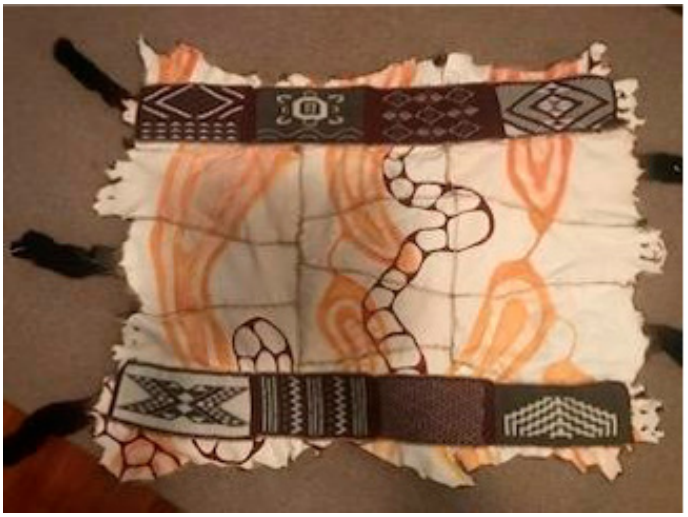
Vicki Couzens and Hinekura Smith outside the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, where this installation stands, 13 May 2024.

lived experiences of colonisation, these women are recreating artistic acts of activism to disrupt the damage that has been done in dismantling the legacy of their people and their connection to Country. By retelling the storylines of their truth, they are reclaiming their knowledge systems in "creative cultural expression ways" and rising up (Couzens, in Australia New Zealand School of Government, 2019, 8:33). Their strength and resilience are conveyed through cloak-making, weaving, poetry, writing and song. The healing occurs as their voices are heard and invited to public platforms to conscientise whole communities.

We can connect as wāhine Māori (Māori women) on many levels. The whakapapa (genealogy) of the learning pedagogy is ako (teaching and learning) (Lee, 2008) and it is cyclic. The movement between tuakana and teina (mentor and mentee) is fluid. At different times, the degree of knowledge and experience in cloak-making is not age defined but skill centred, and easily called upon to share and advance others. There is intergenerational conversation and kinship connection. It is a living practice of knowledge exchange, a continuum of creativity and the space to braid together language and tradition. It is not by default that these creative circles are becoming a growing space for whānau to find their voice and articulate their stories through weaving and cloak-making. After all, it is about a legacy and leaving part of their DNA in creations for mokopuna generations.



Tarryn Love (Gunditjmara) wearing *Kahu–Kooramookyan*, Tāne-nui-ā-Rangi, Waipapa Marae. Photograph courtesy of the International Indigenous Research Conference 2024, Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, University of Auckland. © 2024, Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga.



Kahu–Kooramookyan, in Tāne-nui-ā-Rangi, Waipapa Marae, 2024.

A tangible 'output' of our arts-research exchange saw both Māori and Aboriginal cloak-making practices stitched together in a unique, to our knowledge never-before-seen, collaborative cloak we named *Kahu–Kooramookyan*. Kahu, as explained earlier, is the term for both cloak and placenta. Kooramookyan is the Keeray Wooroong language term for possum-skin cloak.

The conversation about the design for *Kahu–Kooramookyan* began when we sat together around the table during our visit to Melbourne. Here we bounced off each other the imagery we wanted to use and the logistical approach to merging two very different mediums to tell our story. We wanted the integrity of both cultures to complement the understanding, respect and appreciation we had reached as a collective through our relationship to be evident in our cloak work. We discussed traditional patterns and contemporary expressions that hold deep meaning and messages relevant to people, place, language, tradition and resilience. Was it a patchwork-like quilt with possum-skin and tāniko panels? Was it large or was it delicate? And how could we bring together both mediums when an ocean physically separated us? This was not an artistic installation that could be woven online. The two distinct mediums and methodologies needed to be co-constructed independently and then stitched together when we were able to sit again in each other's presence on the same land.

The kooramookyan would be brought to life through a whole-of-family approach. The possum pelts were stitched together by Vicki's sister Lisa. Gina sourced the colours for the painting and, with Vicki and Tarryn, landed on the shapes of the river and eucalyptus leaves. Both are symbolic of storylines of connection and belonging to land, the movement and sustenance of water, and the healing that this plant life brings to mob resilience.

Hinekura and Kim worked on the tāniko borders, independently selecting patterns and colours that represent memories, knowledge acquisition, voice, relationships, reciprocity and wānanga (collective learning circles/opportunities). The cloak would mark united Indigenous values, namely, the central role of women as knowledge holders and teachers who, through cloak-making, are able to elevate a vision of hope, resistance and sustainability for future generations.

We presented *Kahu–Kooramookyan* at two international research conferences. The first was the International Teaching Artists Conference (ITAC) in Tāmaki Makaurau in September 2024, where we shared the fruits of our exchange in a three-hour interactive workshop that explored the practice, pedagogy and activism of revitalising collaborative cloak-making as a powerful site of social justice and community transformation. In November 2024 the authors spoke about this arts-research exchange at the International Indigenous Research Conference (IIRC), hosted by the University of Auckland, in relation to a two-year Kaupapa Māori education project funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) convened by the Ministry of Education. This aimed to story the language and cultural aspirations of three interconnected Māori-immersion education settings in Tāmaki Makaurau to better support understandings of, and responses to, whānau aspirations for flourishing reo and tikanga.

If whānau Māori aspirations can be understood as taonga tuku iho – values, beliefs, ideas, experiences, influences and perceptions passed down intergenerationally – how then do our aspirations for cultural and linguistic sovereignty inform the educational decisions we make for our children? Arts-based Kaupapa Māori qualitative methods of whatu wānanga (data collection), whatu kōrero (analysis) and whatu kaupapa (dissemination) were developed in line with the project's methodology. During a year-long weaving wānanga, in which our Aboriginal sisters participated as honoured guests, ethics-consented whatu kōrero (interviews) were conducted with whānau from three kura as each whānau learnt to weave a cloak for their child or mokopuna. Our presentations, including introducing *Kahu–Kooramookyan*, highlighted the power of creative practice as a language-rich pedagogical site that brings us into relationship with ancestral knowledge through the culturally regenerative practice of cloak-making in, as and for community.

Kahu–Kooramookyan is a tangible expression, or what we saw as an expression, of aroha or 'love letter' to ourselves, and a gift from each culture to the other. The two distinct artistic expressions use symbolism of significant cultural icons. The cloak illustrates the story of reciprocity, reflection and growth. The blending of natural resources and contemporary materials portrays our continued resourcefulness and adaptability as Indigenous women knowledge-keepers and artists to utilise the technologies available to us to ensure our stories and practices continue.

Conclusion

Māori and Aboriginal people have been successful in retaining cultural customs and the transmission of storytelling through creative strategies such as weaving and cloak-making. Through our first-hand experience of exchange in arts practice and collaboration, we can attest to the benefits of artivism as an intervention that strengthens our Indigenous identities. As our hands make, our hearts and minds are using the same movements and intentions enacted by our ancestors. By bringing 'old' ways of knowing (H. Smith, 2019) and doing into our contemporary lived experience, we bring our ancestors back into being to sit alongside us as we reweave threads of ourselves that colonisation may have frayed but could never sever.

Speaking of the endangered Keeray Wooroong language of north-west Victoria, Aunty Vicki Couzens reminds us that "language is in our land and surrounds all of us" (Australia New Zealand School of Government, 2019b, 16:13). Our shared methodologies in the reclamation of space, voice and identity are grounded in values of connection to land, observation of the environment, and the vital link that kinship relationships have in upholding our languages and traditions. Language revitalisation and the pedagogy of artivism assert a global Indigenous kaupapa to weave together the answers to our spirit of endurance in ancestral knowledge systems and the intergenerational sharing of this body of knowledge.

Where we as Indigenous peoples persist in building resilience against inherent and ongoing traumas of colonisation, cloak-making provides another site of resistance. This site is a safe place for whole communities to develop their language, grow kinship lines and revive ancient creative expressions. They are knowledge-creation sites that support our wellbeing on our own Indigenous land; stitch by stich, twist by twist, bind by bind, are made the artefacts and treasures that belong to each culture.

Glossary

ako	teaching and learning
aroha	empathy, love
harakeke	flax
he pure	a cleansing
kahu	amniotic sac
kaitahi	shared meal, to eat together
kākahu	woven cloak
kaiwhatu	weaver
karakia	recite ritual chant or prayer
kaupapa	purpose, initiative
kawa	protocol
kooramookyan	possum-skin cloak
kura	school
manaaki	take care of, express empathy
manaakitanga	to be hospitable and extend support to others
mana motuhake	our own cultural uniqueness, independence
manuhiri	visitors
maunga	mountain
mokopuna	grandchild/ren, descendants
muka	fibre of the flax that is extracted for weaving
pōwhiri	formal welcoming ceremony
puku	belly
pūrākau	narrative
rongoā	healing, medicinal herbal balm
taiao	natural environment
Tāmaki Makaurau	Auckland
tamariki	children
tangata/tāngata	person, people
tangata whenua	Indigenous people of the land
taonga tuku iho	the teachings of our forebears
te reo Māori	the Māori language
Te Whenua Moemoea	'the land of dreaming', Māori name for Australia
tikanga	cultural ethics, protocols
tohu	sign, symbol
toi Māori	creative Maōri spaces and practices
tuakana–teina	mentor (experience)–mentee (learner) relationship
waerea	protective incantation, to clear
wāhine Māori	Māori women
wānanga	teaching and learning forum
whakapapa	genealogy
whānau	kinship group
whānau Māori	Māori family
whanaunga	relatives
whanaungatanga	connection and maintenance of relationships
whatu	to bind, twist, weave
whatu kākahu	hand-woven cloak, or art of cloak-weaving
whatu kaupapa	dissemination phase of research
whatu kōrero	data-analysis phase of research
whatu wānanga	learning space, data collection phase of research
whenu	vertical warp threads
whenua	placenta, land
whiria	plaiting

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