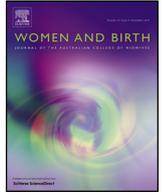




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Birthing As Country

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ABSTRACT

Background: This case study explores the four pregnancy and birthing journeys of Wiradjuri & Ngemba-Wayilwan woman, Fleur Magick Dennis. Fleur provides a personal account of her journeys and relates them to socio-cultural issues surrounding her life during these times. Fleur experienced her first birth in hospital and her three next births at different locations out of hospital on Wiradjuri Country. Fleur is able to show that her personal wellbeing & healing and that of her family & community is linked to her having been able to birth according to her spiritual & cultural beliefs.

The midwife for Fleur's third and fourth pregnancy, Hazel Keedle, then provides a brief account of her experiences supporting Fleur in her choices and explores the impact of these births on her midwifery and personal life.

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Statement of significance

Issue

This paper explores the lived experiences of a Wiradjuri woman birthing on country.

What is already known

Birthing on country is an important issue for Aboriginal women in Australia and for maternity care providers.

What this paper adds

This paper adds knowledge on the importance and benefits for women who birth on country by understanding the experiences of a Wiradjuri woman and her midwife.

1. Fleur

I am a Wiradjuri and Ngemba-Wayilwan woman – I am descended from a Wiradjuri woman named Bidy Sergeant whose daughters, Sarah & Annie Haywood, were “lay” midwives for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women during the 1850's through to around 1890. Annie Bridget Magick (nee Haywood) died in 1872 whilst giving birth in the bush after having already birthed around

14 other children in the bush. Her daughter, Annie Bridget Magick the second was only 5 years old when she lost her mum.

I have grown up knowing about and living my Aboriginal identity all my life. My mother, my grandmother, my grandmother's sisters, my grandmother's cousins, all across my family are strong leaders in our Aboriginal communities. My mother and grandmother taught me about being Aboriginal as a child. Eventually I learnt about myself beyond being Aboriginal, and more about being Wiradjuri and Ngemba-Wayilwan, during my coming of age time, when my grandmother and her sisters spent time with me and sent me for further cultural learning. I did not know until recently that my direct Wiradjuri female ancestors had been midwives or that my direct ancestor had died when giving birth in the bush.

2. Birthing As Country

Our Wiradjuri name for Country is Ngurambang.^{1,c} For us, ngurambang is also miyagan (family). Everything in country is our

^c All the Wiradjuri language shared in this paper has come from my learning through the Wiradjuri language programs that were commenced by Uncle Stan Grant and through the resources that he created with Dr John Rudder. I was personally taught Wiradjuri language by Uncle Stan Grant upon my inviting him to Orange and I continued to learn language through the programs created by Uncle Stan and other Wiradjuri Elders including the present day Graduate Diploma of Wiradjuri Language, Culture & Heritage that I'm part of at Charles Sturt University. I have also learnt Wiradjuri language from other Elders however the life works of Uncle Stan Grant have been my primary learning place of the language over the last 14 years.

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family. It is a deepness of connection that is hard to explain because it is a feeling. I have always felt a deep peace when I am in the bush with our country. Although country is still with us in the cities, the suburbs, the towns, these places have always been too busy for me and with lots of spiritual “noise” from things too disconnected from our natural ecology, the web of life our miyagan (family). In the bush I feel healthy, right and good – waluwin – we say in our Wiradjuri language.

Our Elders teach us “We are this country”, country is us, we are country. We breathe country, we drink country, we eat country, we live country. Country is everything, without country there is no life. So we sing country, we dance country, we care for country, we re-energise country. In so doing, through giving “thanks” we also re-energise ourselves and everything in existence.

Birthing As Country is birthing with this deep knowing, with the knowing that we are country, country is us. I am not “on” the country, I am perhaps in country or with country but more deeply I am Country and Country is me and my baby.

I would like to share with you a little about my birthing stories and how my birthing stories are connected to my cultural healing and cultural re-birthing trajectories, how my birthing decisions have also led other family and community members towards connected cultural healing and cultural re-birthing trajectories – impacts that can all be traced to at least partially stemming from the catalyst of my decisions to *Birthing As Country*.

For me, becoming pregnant and giving birth was an incredible catalyst for my own healing and re-birthing. With my first and subsequent pregnancies I began, and continued with increasing depth, a journey of connection more strongly to our Wiradjuri country & culture and our Wiradjuri women's business.

3. James Indymarra - first pregnancy

I had an inner knowing as soon as I became pregnant with my eldest son James Indymarra (who is now 15). This inner knowing was a fire burning inside me that drove me with immense passion towards bringing back our cultural practices and ceremonies with respect to pregnancy and birth. I did not understand where this inner knowing had come from, but my cultural upbringing had taught me to trust this deep knowing. I trusted this calling to do what I knew was right for me, for my baby, for my people, for our country, for our futures. I believed as we say that “my ancestors and my country were speaking through me”. At the time I could not even begin to imagine the ramifications and extended impacts through multiple generations that my trusting and acting on that inner knowing would have for myself, my family and my community.

I now know that it was more than my ancestors in general giving this feeling to me, this knowing fire in my spirit – I believe I have been directly engaged by my old people, my direct female ancestors to begin to heal historical trauma both in our family line and in our country. I have been called on by our Wiradjuri ancestors to reconnect myself and others to our birthing ceremonies, our cultural ways, our country. My spirit was open to listen deeply and to know, to trust, to follow the calling. I heard my ancestors and they stood with me through my/our journey creating strong again our miyagan, our family.

I wanted to birth James Indymarra my first born in the bush. I lived in a quiet rental home in a bush area, not in my own Wiradjuri country but in my then partner's country. I had engaged a home birth midwife and I had planned a home birth inside my quiet house surrounded by the bush – maybe I would have wandered around outside during my labour looking out at the beautiful lake that we could see from our hillside, thinking of the dreams of whales that my sister had of country, connecting with the eagles that often flew overhead, the owl that regularly sat watch over me from the tree near our home . . . it was not to be.

The local hospital no longer had a maternity ward. All local women had to travel to another hospital about an hour away and “off country” so that there were no longer any babies born on country, not since a long time ago. Most Aboriginal women from the area had memories of not being allowed into the local hospital ward to birth, of being made to birth outside the actual hospital. I didn't care for hospitals. I wanted my baby to be born in his country, to bring birth back home. I wanted to feel strong in our culture for my birth, I wanted my baby to be born into strong culture. I invited quite a few of my female “in-laws” to attend my birth. I thought I was offering such a gift for the grandmothers to see their first grandchild born in their own country.

I was contacted by a distraught Elder who had been forced by circumstances to be a midwife on an Aboriginal reserve. There were no hospitals anywhere near this Aboriginal reserve. At the time this Elder lived there, during the 1950's and 1960's Aboriginal women had no access to medical help of any sort during birth. This Auntie was the woman who stood up and made herself be strong for the women and families of the community. She attended all the births as the “lay” midwife. She told me she saw terrible things and it was terrible for her and the women birthing in the bush this way. This Elder and the family members were terrified that my desire for a home birth and not to attend the hospital was taking our people back to this time of no access to medical help. The Elder told me I did not have her blessing to birth at home. The “in-laws” were so distressed they even made up cultural rumours to create community disease with my birth, rumours such as that I was going to have a didgeridoo playing at my birth and that I was going to give birth on a men's cultural site – none of which were true of course but all of which stemmed from the community's fear of my preferred choice not to birth in a hospital. The “disease” means unease but also represents the holistic health approach of Aboriginal wellbeing where we know that unease or unhealthy words, unhealthy relationships, negativity etc. also creates not just poor mental health but actual disease in our community because our bodies become sick with the negativity.

I was heartbroken. I began my journey home to my mother's Wiradjuri country. My mum was living home in country and so I, very heavily pregnant and heartbroken headed home. It was the best thing that could have happened, the old ones “forcing” me to leave my partner's country and come home to birth. I did not know it at the time, but this was the ancestor's way of making sure that I connected myself and my baby to our culture in our Wiradjuri country.

I had, prior to becoming pregnant, been held hostage and subjected to grievous bodily harm in a serious assault from my ex-partner. My becoming pregnant was a result of trauma induced “looking for love”. Of not caring for myself or what happened to my body any more. I needed healing. Things changed when I became pregnant. Pregnancy and the thought of being a mum to a tiny human being impacted me enormously. I had intense motivation to be a good mum. I gave up drinking alcohol and smoking Yarni (Marijuana) because I did not want to harm my baby. Then there was the “spirit voices” from the ancestors that pulsed through me so strongly, leading me to sacred sites, sharing wisdom with me in my dreams and during my waking hours, calling me into creating a cultural birth. Calling me into my healing.

During my journey home to my mum and our Wiradjuri country I stopped in on a friend from the home birthing movement. I was in a heartbroken state from my “in-laws” rejecting my choice to birth as I wished in my own home. I knew what I and my baby needed for our healing, to commence our journey together as mother and child – but other people wanted to control my choices, to not permit me to birth in the way that I needed to.

In my grief, both stemming from my trauma of being recently so severely assaulted by my ex-partner prior to the pregnancy and

also in my grief from being rejected by my “in-laws” in my gift of birthing baby in their country with grandmothers, I said to my friend that I was considering free birthing in the bush in my Wiradjuri country if I could not find a midwife to support me. My friend said that she believed that women who had been through trauma should not be allowed to home birth, that women needed to be of good mental health to have a successful home birth. I was enraged! I felt that every Aboriginal woman had the same right to make birth choices just like any white woman who could choose to home birth. The reality is that most Aboriginal women have been through significant trauma and carry historical generational trauma. I felt this meant we needed home birthing MORE than other privileged white women, not that we had no right to it, but rather that it was a key to our healing process. I knew it was a key to my healing process. I was once again heart broken, but I continued my journey home and I continued my resolve to have a cultural birth for my baby and me.

I tried hard to find a home birth midwife but at that time in the Central West there were none operating. I did not have many networks the way I did for later pregnancies, so I could not find a home birth midwife to support me to give birth outside of the hospital. I decided to have the strongest cultural birth I could in the hospital at Orange (which was my closest hospital about an hour away from where my mother was living in Wiradjuri country). I wrote up a birth plan and presented the birth plan to the midwife I met at my “booking in” appointment. I met a midwife called Deirdre Leslie during one of my check-ups. Deirdre ended up being one of the midwives who attended the birth of my first son James Indyamarra.

My Grandmother travelled all the way from South Australia to be at the birth of her first great-grandchild. My mother and my grandmother and my then partner all watched me give birth in the hospital. It was part of my birth plan to have my mother and grandmother with me for the birth. It was part of my birth plan to birth naturally, without gas, without any sort of drugs, which I did. When I arrived at the hospital my waters had already broken.

A midwife asked me to get up on the bed, so they could check how dilated I was I think. I refused. It was in my birth plan that I was no way going to get on the bed. I knew it all went downhill from the point they make you get on the bed. I told them, NO, I'm staying on the floor and if you want to do any monitoring or checking you can do it from the floor. I gave birth very beautifully and quickly on the floor of the hospital squatting whilst supported by my mother. The feeling of being supported by my mother whilst giving birth to her grandchild was a powerful feeling.

I also had my artistically decorated cultural affirmations poster stuck up onto the hospital wall and I refused the oxytocin as per my birth plan and delivered the placenta naturally as well. I kept my placenta as per my birth plan, taking it home with me in my ice cream container ready for our ceremony in country which was held 5 days after the birth. I held my beautiful son on my breast skin to skin immediately and felt such joy. I left the hospital before any of the doctors came on duty, I had come in around midnight I think and birthed by around 3.30am and left around 7.30/8am. I was so glad I had given birth when there were not doctors on duty. It had been part of my birth plan that no male doctors were allowed in the room with me, that I did not want any doctors at all at my birth, only midwives. I doubt the hospital would have stuck to that part of the plan, but the old ones, our ancestors gave me the gift of being in and out before anyone could disturb my cultural hospital birth. The hospital said it was the first request for a placenta in over 10 years. I was just glad to go home and nurture my baby under the loving and experienced guidance of my mum and grandmother.

Five days later as we were driving out to our cultural women's site in country, where I had visited with my mum and other cultural Wiradjuri women during my pregnancy, I watched the

eagles guiding our way out to country for baby's ceremony. Mum had chosen his Wiradjuri name, Indyamarra. Grandma chose the place, we walked along the river until Grandma said the spot where the ceremony would be. The rocks there have special markings in them, ancient markings from our Wiradjuri people. Grandma and Mum and sisters and I we smoked baby with the green leaves on the fire, we introduced baby to bila galing (river water) and to dhaagun (earth) by painting his face with white ochre from country.

I sang, I shared stories of my grief and my hopes, my mum and Grandma and sister shared stories of their hopes for me as a new mum and their blessings for our baby. Mum gave baby his Wiradjuri name. Grandma lifted her hands to the sky and gave the most powerful prayer I have ever heard filled with love. We also buried baby's placenta near an ancient medicine tree. We had created a new Wiradjuri sacred site. We call our place of birth and place of placenta burial ngiyanhigingunha bural in our Wiradjuri language. James Indyamarra has grown up knowing his sacred place all his life. I see James walk strong in his connection to country, in his knowing of his sacredness, of his worth and his power. This journey has been his empowerment, my empowerment. Each time we return to our bural we give honour to this sacred living site.

You may think sacred sites are only about places that were sacred prior to invasion. You could not be more mistaken. Every birth place of every Aboriginal child, especially the site of their placenta burial or bural is a very sacred place. According to Wiradjuri law woman Minmia, the placenta is an enormous source of healing light and when we bury the placenta we are also giving a gift of light to the earth, to Ngurambang (country). The gift goes both ways, Minmia teaches that the placenta carries the unique life journey print of each baby, as unique as each person's fingerprint is unique. That this placenta life journey print needs to be buried in the earth in order for the person to have a strong life journey.² Minmia believes that youth suicide rates could be improved if only people's placenta's were all buried in the earth as our women's law dictates is necessary.

The thing is I did not meet Minmia or learn these Wiradjuri birthing teachings from Minmia directly until I was pregnant with my third child. However, I knew that I had to bury the placenta, that it had to be with a tree. I knew the ceremony for baby needed to include our women giving ‘blessings’ for the baby. I knew what had to be done. I knew because the ancestors spoke through me and taught me through spirit, I knew because my living Elders had taught me to listen when the old people speak through my spirit. I am so glad I listened and trusted them. Meeting Minmia was a gift of validation, of realising that my trust in myself and in my old people, my trust in our people's spiritual ways had been warranted and a most profound blessing. I was so glad to further my Wiradjuri women's business learning with Minmia.

Later a most incredible thing happened; the midwife who had attended James Indyamarra's birth, Deirdre Leslie then reconnected with me at the Bush Babies Aboriginal playgroup I attended and also joined the Wiradjuri language classes I later organised for my community. I remember I had told Deirdre about our Aboriginal cultural way that whoever is present at the birth becomes another mother to the baby. I never expected this non-Aboriginal woman to seriously take our law on board. We reconnected through Aboriginal cultural activities in the community and through my reaching out to her for support. We have now been friends for over 15 years and Deirdre has indeed been another mother to my sons and has made a highly significant positive impact on our lives. Deirdre too has been out to our bural and connected with our sacred country there, along with many more members of our extended family as you will hear.

James is an incredible young Wiradjuri man who has grown up knowing his birth totems, knowing his sacred country, his bural, knowing his own sacredness – a gift I wish for every human being on this earth. A truly healing gift.

4. Preston Gulbalgirri - second pregnancy

It was not long before I became pregnant again and I returned home to live in our Wiradjuri country. This time I was able to find a home birth midwife because I was determined to birth in the bush out at our sacred bural. I wrote an email to the organisation Home Birth Sydney asking them to distribute it among their members and any home birth midwives they knew. I did not have enough money to pay for a home birth midwife. I lived in a housing commission “ghetto” area in the Central West of NSW, one of the most disadvantaged areas. My then partner and I lived on Centrelink benefits alone except my then partner drank and gambled his money most paydays.

I asked if there would be a midwife out there willing to assist me to birth in the bush in exchange for the cultural experience of doing so and the “baby bonus” Centrelink money I would receive after the birth. I found a midwife!

My second son, Preston Gulbalgirri, was due at the end of Autumn and it was already extremely cold when we went to stay in the hand-built cottage that our friends own near the bila (river) where Preston Gulbalgirri was born. Whilst we were staying in the cottage we cooked stews on the campfire, we also had an open fire place inside and baby (inside my tummy) and I listened to the songs in Wiradjuri language recorded by Uncle Stan Grant over and over again. Our fluent Wiradjuri language seemed so overwhelmingly difficult to me, I did not know how I would ever be able to understand or speak it or sing these songs. I loved listening to them. It was only a few years later, after starting the Wiradjuri language classes in Orange for my community, that with help from our teachers including Uncle Stan Grant, that I was able to sing almost all those songs myself to my boys as they were growing up. I not only birthed my sons, but through their cultural births, I re-birthing our language back into our family line.

Preston's birth story was published in the National Geographic titled “Born of the Dreamtime”. I was a guest speaker at the Garma festival in Arnhem land where I delivered Preston's birth story completely in fluent Wiradjuri language (and then translated it for the listeners afterwards). In addition to the Wiradjuri women's ceremonies that we women held for James & Preston, a very special Wiradjuri grandfather & Elder also separately did ceremony for both my eldest sons. Grandfather danced for Preston and it was the most beautiful & powerful experience I had ever seen to see our Elder honouring me and my baby and his sacred bural in this way.

At our women's ceremony Mum again gave baby his Wiradjuri name, Gulbalgirri. My Mum had backed me through organising everything for my first bush birth. Without her and her support it couldn't have happened. Preston, like James, also grew up knowing his birth totems, knowing his sacred place, his bural, knowing country, knowing his connection, knowing his own sacredness. Throughout our life we consistently return to ngiyanhigunha bural, our sacred birthing place, for connection to Country, for learning about Country, about our culture, for being as Country. Preston has become a powerful young leader and teacher of our culture, he stands strong in who he is and he is spiritually connected and has a life with deep meaning.

The way I feel reminds me of a quote that was first shared with me by Sue Kildea. The quote is from an Inuit Elder:

“I can understand that some of you may think that birth in remote areas is dangerous. And we have made it clear what it means for our women to birth in our communities. And you must know that a life without meaning is much more dangerous”.

–Jusapie Padlayat, a Salluit elder³

Atkinson⁴ wrote a book “Trauma trails, recreating songlines” – I believe that through my birthing practices I have started myself and my family and other community members upon a healing trajectory, a healing journey of re-birthing our songlines.

The way that I needed to propel my journey into the revival of our family culture was through the power of birth, the spiritual power of birth was known to me through the voices of my ancestors and it is the power of birth that was the catalyst to our family reviving and strengthening our culture and our country.

The midwife who attended Preston's birth did not stay in contact with me. She spent most of her time trying to get cultural information from my then partner who “appears” more Aboriginal than me due to his darker skin. The thing that skin colour does not tell anyone is how much learning that person has done with their Elders and how much that person cares about their culture. What the midwife did not know is that its culturally inappropriate to learn Aboriginal culture from a man if you are a woman and that my ex-partner was not interested in his culture at that time. That I had, at that time, spent more time sitting and learning culture with his Elders than he ever had. That I had spent considerable time sitting with my own Elders and learning and with other Elders from across NSW and Australia – mainly through my participation in my Uncle Jack Beeton's Aboriginal Philosophy Camps and my participation in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. I was passionate about my culture and relatively knowledgeable at that time despite my youth. Unfortunately, my first bush birth midwife missed out on the opportunity to connect with what I had, perhaps because of her misconceptions about skin colour and authenticity of Aboriginal cultural knowledge? The right people are always at ceremony, the old people make sure of that, the midwife left before Preston's ceremony occurred, because we waited longer than the 5 days we had waited for James' ceremony.

Not long after Preston was born I had a documentary maker contact me and ask me whether my cultural birthing knowledge was directly passed down to me through the generations physically from person to person or whether it was something that I had made up. I was stunned. I was young, not very confident and did not have the years of validation that I have now. I had lots of significant cultural knowledge that had been passed to me directly, physically. And perhaps in the case of the cultural birthing revival that I commenced for my family, the most significant cultural knowledge that I had was the understanding that the old people, our ancestors and our country would speak through me and to trust that. There is recorded evidence of our people bringing in new ceremony ways based on messages from people no longer alive who have passed this information through dreams, visions or through spirit. It's not rational what happened to me, its spiritual – that I knew what do to for my child's birthing without being told in real life. And yet the accuracy of what spirit told me is our women's business, has been confirmed in many ways, including that a Wiradjuri law woman Minmia teaches the same women's business as what I practiced myself prior to meeting Minmia, as led by spirit. I am sorry that the non-Aboriginal person who questioned me did not find the re-birthing of our cultural ways and practices authentic enough for her, it is certainly been authentic enough for our family, it is not only been authentic but entirely transformational.

After the birth of my second son, Preston, I started up Wiradjuri language classes in my community in Orange. I fundraised for the cost to bring in Wiradjuri Elders to teach us the language. I coordinated the workshops and kept the momentum going by keeping everyone in touch. I organised catering and a creche so Mum's could participate. Eventually I applied for government funding to continue the program for my people and to build upon it and I began to work part time out of the Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council coordinating the new Wiradjuri language program.

From this I eventually got asked to teach Wiradjuri language in the local schools and then at TAFE to get more Wiradjuri people qualified to teach our language. I also started a Wiradjuri women & girls dance group and began to write songs in the Wiradjuri language and choreograph dances about our Wiradjuri women's practices on country that had been taught to me by my grandmother and her sister. These songs and dances also came to me through spirit, it was not something that I had planned, but something that I was directed to do by ancestors whose spirits came through me.

At this time, I also completed my Undergraduate degree whilst also leaving a domestic violence relationship. The father of my eldest two sons had three times been arrested for assaulting me, on the third time went to jail for around 6 months. When the police came they told me that if they ever came back to attend another assault on me by him that they would also take my children away. I had to make a decision not to ever return to my partner or my children would have lost not just one parent but their mother too. It was really hard to leave. I really loved my partner at the time, or at least I thought I did and I wanted a happy family. I womaned up and raised my boys single handed whilst continuing my work in the community reviving our Wiradjuri language and women's dance. I helped my sons to heal from the trauma of seeing their father being violent. I helped my boys to grow stronger.

I still thought I needed a man though! I went through some serious trauma again, this time community inflicted rather than partner inflicted and so I ended up in a space of being suicidal due to the severe community bullying I went through. I looked for comfort in a man. I ended up pregnant with another "trauma baby".^d

5. Yiri Dyiraamalang - third pregnancy

Yiri was my third son, he was born on the banks of the bila (river) and it is literally on his birth certificate – place of birth: "banks of the (*name of river*) river" because my amazing midwife Hazel Keedle argued with Births, Deaths and Marriages to have the truth printed on Yiri's Birth Certificate. I have made a lifelong friend in Hazel. She was an incredible midwife, always believing in me and my ability to trust myself and to know what my body and my baby needs. Hazel and I came up with a risk management plan for birthing in the bush. Hazel brought her equipment including oxygen bottles into the bush – 20 min' walk from any road – to store the equipment on a tarp in a cave under an escarpment beside the bila (river).

I spent a month in the bush prior to giving birth to Yiri. After the trauma I had been through I desperately needed this time with country to heal. Country and our ancestors had created a stunning place in Country especially for this birth. A flood occurred just prior to me heading out to Country. So, the bila (river) was high and flowing strongly with plenty of deep swimming holes. I spent my days with my sons relaxing in the river, meditating to the sound of yanggu (music of water) as the bila (river) danced over the rocks. I enjoyed floating on my back in the water and sitting in the natural spas of bubbling water where the bila (river) flowed over the rocks and created the massaging currents. The flooding waters had brought lots of firewood to the bural (birthing place) and so it was

easy to collect plenty for the fires for birthing night. The rains had also set off the plants into bush tucker fruiting mode so all around Country was plentiful and abundant with vibrant life!

Wiradjuri sisters came and joined me for the birth as country. Some staying some of the time or coming and going. Some staying for the long haul. We had beautiful ceremony on Country, lots of it! We created a little shelf of gifts inside the cave near the bila (river) where miyagan (family) left gifts for baby from Country about things that would connect him and teach him about his Country. I also had lots of quality time in Country with my eldest sons James & Preston. We had all had the most amazing time with country waiting for baby Yiri.

My sisters said that when I went into labour they could hear my voice singing as it echoed in the gorge, they could hear me giving birth a kilometre away. When I went into labour I was so happy because we had been waiting a month and Hazel could not stay much longer, nor could Mum, so it was time for baby to come out or we would all have to leave!

Whilst I was in labour, I lit the fires that I had pre-prepared in the circle around me on the banks of the bila (river). I sang and sang Yiri's beautiful birth song whilst swaying in my labour. Yiri's birth song is the Yanggu (music of water) song because that is the song Country gave me during his pregnancy and birth. Yiri was coming so fast I slowed down the birth with my body positions – with Hazel's guidance helping me to trust that whatever my body was telling me to do was right for me and for baby. I loved being fully naked as Country, just me and the earth under the stars by the music of the rapids in the bila (river). When I birthed Yiri I put him on my chest, skin to skin right away, and watched him find his way to my ngamu (breast). Laying with my baby Yiri under the stars by the bila that night was so incredibly beautiful. Yiri's totem tree was the wood on the fires and it is an aromatic timber so the smell of the smoke was part of that beautiful memory.

The next day my family all came to meet the baby. Sisters and sons danced ceremony for baby welcoming him further into our miyagan (family).

Yiri's birth story was published in the "Birthing" magazine. Baby Yiri coming into my life re-birthed me again. The time I spent with Country healing from the recent trauma I had experienced gave me the strength and courage I needed to be the best single Mum I could be. I gave up on looking for the right man and was happy just to take care of me and raise the best sons I could.

Part of the trauma I had experienced from community bullying prior to Yiri's birth also included that a Wiradjuri Elder wrote to me disapproving of my role in regard to promoting "Birthing On Country". This Elder also had negative experiences of birth I later found out and was very fearful of me promoting birthing in the bush to Aboriginal women. This Elder was not aware that I was actually promoting cultural birthing whether at home, in the bush or in the hospital and that I was also promoting the woman's right to choose her place of birth, that we need to all trust a woman's ability to make the best choice for herself and her baby once she is properly informed of any health or risk factors in an unbiased way. I have supported many Aboriginal women to include cultural aspects as part of their hospital births and I have never pushed any birthing in the bush views onto any woman – I have simply assisted any women however they have requested me to do so at the time, usually with ceremony knowledge about women's birthing or cultural names for baby or ideas about how to include cultural aspects into their pregnancies or births.

Birthing Yiri in the bush was the most profound healing I had ever experienced in my life up until that point. It was also healing for my sons, my many sisters who came out and my nieces. It had a massive impact on the people who were present. These miyagan (family) continue to connect with Country in this place in an

^d In calling some of my children "trauma babies" I am in no way diminishing the exceptional love I have for my children and the gratefulness that I have that they came into my life. Despite being called into me because I was looking for love whilst being in a space of trauma, the children who were gifted to me have propelled me into working on becoming a better person to be a better mother and have therefore been an immense gift of healing and all my children have brought me such joy that every day I share with my children how much I love them and also that I am glad to be sharing my life with them.

ongoing way – using the healing power of Country to continue to transform their lives.

After giving up on dating men and committing to concentrating on being the best single mum I could be, the old fullas, our ancestors, set me up with an absolute angel! I was working teaching our culture and performing Aboriginal dance at an Aboriginal cultural centre. There I made a friend, we stayed in touch after I left working there and we eventually married. Laurance (Locky) and I both have the same passions about our languages, culture, ceremony, dance and country as one another. The thing is our old fullas, our ancestors in the sky camp got up to some really good match making and aligned things for us to meet. We've been married now for almost seven years. We were married in our sacred country near my children's bural (birthing place). We had an Aboriginal cultural wedding in the bush, our wedding has also been part of our healing journey and the re-birthing of our cultural ways into the future. Prior to getting married we became pregnant with Guurramali. For the first time I had a partner who was fully supportive of *Birthing As Country* and birthing in the bush and who was as passionately committed to it as I am.

6. Guurramali Ngudhaany - fourth pregnancy

Guurramali my youngest son was supposed to be born at the same bural (birthing place) as all his brothers, the same bila (river). His spirit had other ideas though. Labour started early. We did not have time to go out to the bural as planned. We had this other special place – much closer to our home – also in the bush, in a special forest reserve. We as a family had created a corroboree ground there together. We had danced as a family there, we had danced sacred creation dance there, we had danced the creation of everything there. Locky and I had had our first wedding ceremony there, our initial commitment to one another, we had also built our first new family gunya (Aboriginal shelter) there together. I decided to birth Guurramali there in the forest near home since we could not make it out to our other bural (birthing place). Guurramali was born right on the corroboree ground where all of us had danced the sacred creation dances.

Guurramali's labour was much longer than any of my other labours and I began to feel a bit uneasy. Hazel was great as always, encouraging me to trust my body and eventually baby came. I birthed him under the stars again with the circles of fires around me again. Again, Mum was with me the whole time and had supported me through preparing for the birth. Guurramali came out with the cord wrapped around his neck. Hazel expertly did the necessary manoeuvres and removed the cord from around his neck and also gave him some oxygen from the tank. He was fine.

I had been worried about having another baby so soon, I had been worried that I was not ready to have a fourth baby or did not even think I wanted a fourth baby. I was scared I would not love my baby because I was scared I would not cope. It all changed when I held my beautiful son to my chest and exclaimed my deep love for his incredible being. A little while after I birthed my bural (placenta) Mum drove back to the house and asked Locky if he would like to meet his son. When Locky came into the forest he did not come right to the bural (birthing place). He waited out of visual range of us and sung out in our language to ask permission to come into the women's birthing place/time. He waited until I sang back that it was ok for him to enter the space. Proud bubaa (father) came to meet his son Guurramali. I had been waiting a long time with the placenta still connected to baby and with baby on my chest skin to skin. The placenta had finished pulsing. Bubaa (father) had brought a stone knife handmade by one of our Elders who had recently passed away. Bubaa (father) cut the cord with the stone knife.

Bubaa (father), Ngama (mother) and baby Guurramali, we all slept together under the stars that night, covered in kangaroo and wallaby skin blankets that Bubaa (father) and the older brothers had made in the lead up to baby being born. It was an incredible feeling lying under those soft warm kangaroo & wallaby skins with my true love, an angel of a man and my darling new gudha (baby). Bubaa (father) kept the fires going through the rest of the night. The forest where Guurramali was born is famous for its birdlife. We awoke in the morning to the most glorious sounds of birdsong, birdsong with no other sounds, birdsongs of so many different types, an absolutely glorious way for Guurraamali to wake to be alive for his first sunrise to such a magnificent expression of love and life.

Later, in the days following we buried Guurramali's placenta and did women's ceremonies for Mum and baby. We also regularly return as a family to Guurramali's bural and spiritually upkeep the site, singing and dancing his bural up. Also, we spent time connecting with Country and learning about our Country and ourselves – as the boys grow, they grow together with their Country. This is cultural parenting. This is the connection and belonging that has been birthed through *Birthing As Country*, through birthing in the bush.

All my babies have been breastfed, James my eldest till he was one, Preston my second eldest till he was two and Yiri was still breastfeeding when Guurramali was born, I'd been continuing his breastfeeding throughout my pregnancy and preparing Yiri that he would be sharing ngamu (breast) with baby soon. I successfully fed them both till Yiri was four – for another almost three years. Then continued to feed Guurramali on his own until he was four. I loved the spiritual connection of breastfeeding, of nourishing my children with women's magical and potently powerful breastmilk miracle. My boys learnt the calls for breastfeeding in our languages and they felt loved and close to their Ngama (Mum).

Guurramali's bural (birthing place), although still in Wiradjuri country, is on a songline pathway that links the other brother's bural through to our Wayilwaan country. Guurramali had chosen to be born in a place near the border to Wayilwaan country linking to his father's country through being closer along the songline towards Wayilwaan country. The other amazing thing is that I found out years later, that the place where Guurramali was born is very close physically to where my ancestor Annie Bridget Magick (nee Haywood) had died during birthing in the bush.

My sons are guardians of the songline that they are all born along. They are protectors of their/our country there. Their/our country is at risk from coal mining, so much of the country has been destroyed in the last 15 years when we first had James' ceremony there in Country. 15 years later even more coal mines are proposed, even in the face of this global warming crisis we are living in, governments continue to approve profit hungry companies to mine more coal in one of the most culturally rich places in NSW – the area has hundreds upon hundreds of pre-invasion sites of significance. Not to mention all the sacred sites of the boys buralgalang (birthing places) and our wedding site. These modern sites are just as significant culturally as the ancient ones. They are all at risk. As is our bila (river) there from too much water being taken from it for mining purposes.

Recently I gave myself the gift that I gave my sons. I gave myself the gift of a re-birthing ceremony. When my Mum gave birth to me in the hospital she was only 16 years old. She was lucky to keep me – keeping a placenta was not on her mind – just keeping her baby. Even I have been fearful of having my children taken from me. I kept my birthing plans quiet until after the births because I was concerned that if authorities knew the details of where I was in the bush that they might try to come and take my baby and/or force me into hospital to birth. Keeping everything quiet was just being careful to make sure I had peaceful births, which I did. I'm so

grateful for the support of Hazel my midwife and my Mum in standing by me to give myself and my babies the best start to our lives together. I did my re-birthing ceremony for myself at ngiyanhigunha bural (our birthing place) adding yet another sacred site along the songline – this time giving myself the gift of that sacred site and that connection and belonging of my life journey map being grounded with mother earth and my light being home with Country.

Huge changes happened in my life once I did my re-birthing ceremony. My healing has begun to move forward even more dramatically. Trauma scars that I did not think would ever shift in my lifetime have begun to shift. I truly believe in the power of our women's ceremonies, I believe in the power of our Country, of our ancestors. I believe in the power of *Birthing As Country* and birthing in the bush as a catalyst for the empowerment, healing and re-birthing of our cultural ways of being strong parents, strong guardians of our futures and strong guardians of Country. My nieces have come home to Country to complete their coming of age ceremony. The same nieces who were there nearby for their little brothers' birth in country now have their own sacred sites in country – their coming of age ceremonial sites. In every connection and every layer of healing brings another layer of place and story as country. We are building back the positive songlines all over our country as the layers of healing in us and the layers of healing in country continue to return and magnify.

I want you to know that I am most happy in the bush. If I could choose my place to die, I would choose to die in the bush. I would not want to die in a hospital. Many Aboriginal Elders feel the same way about dying in hospital, they would rather die with Country.

I believe in making the most of the Western medical and technology opportunities that we have available to us that can help save lives. However, I do not believe in taking it so far that in "saving" my life or my "child's" I lose the reason to live, the meaning in our lives.

When Hazel assisted me to birth in the bush we had designed risk management plans together outlining what we would do and how if any difficult circumstances arose. We did not need those plans. Had something occurred which could have led to an evacuation to hospital or even a death I am comfortable in my knowledge that my choice was the best one for myself and my babies in each case. So many women have hospital intervention birth trauma, women have very little control over their own bodies in hospitals. I had complete control over my own body in regard to bringing each new life into the world. This is powerful healing for one who has been through trauma. What I loved about birthing outside of hospital was the level of responsibility it places on me. That it is my responsibility to bring the child into the world, that I am not handing my power over to the hospital to be responsible for me and my life and my child's life.

When Yiri was almost two years old he nearly died from a burst appendix. Dubbo hospital did not realise what it was and thought he just had gastro, until his organs started shutting down and he was flown by helicopter to Randwick children's hospital. All the hospital staff thought my baby would die. I never gave up on him. I sang our cultural songs to him right throughout the time he was "dying" in my arms waiting for surgery. I sang strength into him, I sang him and sang him with all my spirit. I chose the medical help and even though they failed him on some levels, eventually surgery saved his life when they opened him up, found the burst appendix gone septic through his system and cleaned his insides out and then after a long recovery I still have a darling, life filled son. It was not just the surgery that saved his life though. I completely believe that it was my continued breastfeeding right throughout the time up till the surgery and afterwards that helped save his life, his strong connection to me and his country and the singing up of power and strength into him that I constantly sung into him when

he was sick. I did not turn his life over to the hospital. I took responsibility culturally for his well-being as well. I took care of his spirit, something a hospital of strangers can not do. I sung his spirit strong just as I have sung many babies, mine and others into the world. It is the taking care of spirit in birth, in life, in sickness, in health, in relationship and in death that matters. We are this Country, this Country is us. The spirit of everything, of all of creation is within us and we are the spirit of everything of all of creation.

I am born as country, I live as country, I will die as country.

7. Hazel

Having the opportunity to be Fleur's midwife was such a positive experience for myself as a midwife and a woman.

Back in 2009 I responded to an email looking for a midwife to assist Fleur birthing on country. My initial reaction was not fear and trepidation but intrigue and curiosity on what this would entail. After contacting Fleur and then our initial meeting I was excited to be a part of her birthing journey.

Being involved with Fleur's birth of Yiri took a lot of planning and family organisation on my part. All my five kids were under the age of 12 and my husband worked full time but with the help of friends and some creative school holiday ideas I was able to stay on location with the youngest kids and a friend for most of the summer school holidays.

Looking back, it was an idyllic time. On the first day my family and I transported the birth kit down the river and had a smoking ceremony to welcome us. I kept a journal the whole time and the days were filled with exploring the land, bush walks, swimming in the river and hanging out with Fleur and her family. Alongside this was regular antenatal appointments at the birth site. It was a time of detoxing from the hospital system as I had just left to enter full time private practice. Over the weeks I watched Fleur as she prepared her birth site with piles of wood for the fire, often carrying large amounts. I came to see her strength, independence and relationship with the environment around her and it was inspiring.

Towards the end of the time we planned to be there friends of mine took the kids to stay at theirs and I moved to be even closer to Fleur. I spent a wonderful day hanging around at the birthing site, swimming in the river together and sharing stories, just Fleur and I. It was so magical and intimate. That evening I was going to head back to the campsite but felt that I should stay close and asked if I could camp there on the site. Sitting by the fire there was a feeling of excited expectation but no signs of labour, well no obvious physical ones.

After only being in the tent about 30 min. I was called by Fleur and labour had started. I assisted as needed but Fleur led the way. The all woman team included her mum who provided comfort and love and very quickly Yiri was born.

Fleur and Yiri settled down for feeding and sleeping under the stars and her mum retreated to a tent but I was pumped! I sat in a camping chair and could not stop writing in my journal. The sound of the river and the light of the moon and stars just speaking to my soul. I had been forever changed in that moment. Trusting birth away from our assumed safety nets of hospitals or ease of transfer from home. I was exhilarated after witnessing an empowered, strong woman birth in her way, in the location she wanted and surrounded by love.

I thought that was a once in a lifetime experience but when I was contacted again by Fleur I was thrilled. How lucky was I to get this experience twice! This time was different. We already had a great relationship as we had remained friends and spent time together with our families in between births. Circumstances meant we were not at the same location and due to my husband's study

commitments, I drove to her house with all five of my kids. They came in useful though when we went to the birth site with the boys collecting wood for the fires and the girls sweeping the site. I remember my eldest having real purpose and proud to help after he was really touched by the smoking ceremony.

Fleur's experience of labour was very different for her this time, but the benefit was we got to spend time away from the busyness of being a mum as we left the kids at home and hung out at the birth site. We kept fires burning when needed, collected wood, shared stories, slept on and off and walked around. Fleur birthed again with her mum and myself surrounding her with love and support. After the birth her mum went to get Fleur's partner and as Fleur has described, he waited nearby and sung for permission to enter the site. That moment moved me. It showed so much respect for the birthing process and gratitude towards the mother from the father of the baby. Fleur sat with a smile from ear to ear as tears fell from my eyes and she translated some of the words for me.

Sleeping on the swag that night, hearing Fleur and the baby feeding and sleeping nearby, I reflected on the role of birth in the family. My kids remember the moment Fleur's mum told her partner the baby was born with such joy. They are proud they were a part of Fleur's birth, I am proud they were. For some reading it may feel that boundaries were crossed but relationships were formed with ties that ca not be broken.

Registering the birth for Yiri was a bit tricky as putting 'by the side of a river' was not exactly an address. I had to speak with Births, Deaths and Marriages quite a few times till they finally agreed to the birth location, but they were fantastic next time round. I contacted them prior to Guurramali's birth to warn them and they processed the certificate without issue.

I am forever thankful that I got to be on Fleur's birthing journeys of Yiri and Guurramali. I feel that I saw a strength and determination and love for her culture and birth in Fleur that in many ways has been taken away from women. I had always had a spark in me to advocate for women's birthing rites, after being a midwife for Fleur, these sparks turned into a fire.

Declarations of interest

None.

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