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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Surviving On Country

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Taungwurrung, Yorta Yorta

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Living through government intervention in a year-long pandemic has been very different to the life that most Australians have become accustomed to. But to us original Australians, our lives were always being tampered with by successive governments, and we have developed ways of surviving these foreign practices. For me, whenever I am going through any kind of stress, I head for the bush. That is where I feel safe and nurtured. It is also the place that I am most inspired to create. It has always been the case: making mud-cakes was one of the fun things we did as kids; gathering up flowers and tiny twigs and stones and gumnuts and pieces of broken glass to make intricate designs – loved it. These days, with digital phones, we have some of the best photographic equipment in our back pocket, so it is easy to capture the spirit of the land in the high-quality photographic images that we are now able to take.

In my childhood years, we lived on the mission, so the bush was always close by. In the winter-time, Mum might give us kids some small potatoes to cook in the coals of the campfires that we made. The Murray River, or Dhungla, was like a shiny ribbon that meandered across our dad's homeland, and through the traditional Country of so many other Aboriginal people, as it danced its way from the mountains in the north-east to the sea in the south-west. Our waterways and the surrounding land provided us with almost everything that we needed to survive: fish, yabbies, yams, snotty gobblers, honey, mushrooms, kangaroo, emu, and lots of different birds and their eggs. It sounds idyllic but it wasn't always. Some years were very hot and dry where not very much grew and not very much thrived, and then there were the floods when the water spread across the land and upset the ecosystem in its own way too.

All of this happened on a mission station that was at a distance from the nearest local town. Although the mission was no longer controlled by the government, and there was no manager in our time, we still lived in isolation nonetheless. No-one had phones, not even a landline. You had to walk to the local town about a kilometre away and use the phone box, but not many other Aboriginal people had phones then anyway, so we were isolated in that way as well. From 1937 to 1973, Aboriginal people were the subjects of an assimilation policy designed to make all part-Aboriginal



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people white. Then in the early 1960s, the government decided to have another go at dispersing the Aboriginal populations that remained on the missions that they had stopped funding. The last mission manager left in 1953, and the missions became Aboriginal reserves. The Government decided that Aboriginal people should become part of Australian society, and made housing available to us in the towns. Aboriginal families became isolated outposts of the Aboriginal community, and most moved within their family network 'bubble', much like today's pandemic restrictions. Today, Aboriginal people are still isolated in the towns, marooned wherever a house is available, and are economically depressed, because so few appropriate jobs are available to them.

In the face of such division, my brother, who has passed on now, dreamed up an economic strategy based in cultural practice; a strategy that put the earning power back in our hands while educating the non-Aboriginal people to our own patterns of existence in 'their country'. His strategy, based in grass-roots research, exposed the Indigenous underbelly that rests just beneath the surface of even the tiniest towns in non-Aboriginal society. How imaginative is that? Creating a tourism program that sells our version of reality to the society that took it all away from our ancestors and named it after their own ancestors. It is our knowledge of ourselves that keeps us healthy in mind and spirit, and it is our own cultural practice that provides us with a strong foundation for economic development on our own terms.

Some of us have turned out differently from each other in the way we live, but we are unified by our shared experiences, our shared bloodlines, our cultural affiliations and our own personal responsibilities to Country. In the natural world, all things are magical to us. Some of the magic is good and some of it can be very bad, but as we are united through a multiverse of cultural connections, we can only thrive as a community when we thrive as individuals, and that ensures we all thrive as a people.

For me to thrive as an individual, I need access to the bush at all times, and that usually means it turns into a photo-shoot using my own personal form of self-expression and connection: photography. By using photography to express my cultural connections to Country, I am developing a relationship with my camera (in my mobile phone), with the light as it falls on Country, and with the natural environment. Some have said, "It is not art"; although, it takes some artistic flair to make the image talk to people about its value as a document of the spirits in the land. Often when I take photos of the bush, I feel that something draws my eye, and the spirits in the land reveal themselves in the image. Our connection to Country and the land of our



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ancestors nurtures us, and through our kinship system, our identity keeps us united wherever we are and whatever our circumstances. We are a strong, resilient people, and we know how to survive.



Maxine Briggs (Taungwurrung, Yorta Yorta), *Spirits In The Land*, framed photographic print, collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Maxine Briggs is a Taungwurrung and Yorta Yorta woman, and Koori Librarian at the State Library Victoria. Having worked in the public service and Aboriginal community organisations over many years, Maxine has acquired a broad knowledge of Aboriginal societies across Victoria and Australia. In the early 1980s, Maxine was employed at the Koori Information Centre, and began researching the archives of the State Library Victoria and the Museum of Victoria to uncover the traditional symbology and design features of Victorian Aboriginal culture. In 1986, she was working at Koori Press, and helped produce a health book for Victorian Aboriginal communities for a state-wide Aboriginal Health Council. From 1986 to 1992, Maxine was the Assistant Manager of the Koori Unit at the Department of Health, and from there became involved in Aboriginal arts, establishing the Koori Arts Collective.