

Welcome to *Lead in my grandmother's body*, a virtual exhibition from Borroloola about the fast violence of dispossession and the slow violence of environmental contamination. Share and support us in our long struggle for environmental and social justice.

The settler colonial frontier has long been a dangerous and unsafe place for the Indigenous peoples of Australia.

In the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria region of the Northern Territory, explorers, prospectors and cattlemen first entered the ancestral lands of the Garrwa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa peoples in the 1870s. Many of them carried the high calibre Snider and Martini-Henry rifles capable of killing a person more than a kilometre away.¹

The systematic killing of Aboriginal people trying to protect their land, water and families began soon after settler colonisers arrived and continued until around 1910 when the frontier was secured.²

In 1886, at McArthur River, when a cattleman was speared trying to shoot Aboriginal people, a posse of 22 men led by Constable William Curtis shot dead 64 people in one camp alone. 'When the shooting was over, any babies still alive were killed without wasting bullets: held by the ankles, their skulls were dashed against a tree or rock. "Just like goanna", say old Aboriginal people'.³

In 1892, fleeing increasing settler violence, about 70 or 80 Aboriginal people retreated to the top of the Abner Range, a few kilometres southwest of McArthur River. The Aboriginal families, thinking that the colonists' horses could not make it to the top of the range, made camp for the night on the edge of an exposed cliff face with a sheer 150 metre drop to the flat ground below. But the horsemen, following the fleeing men, women and children's tracks, found their way up to the top of the range and formed a semi-circle around the camp.⁴

At first light the colonists opened fire, murdering 52 Aboriginal people, with another dozen found mangled at the bottom of the cliff face.⁵

Historian Tony Roberts estimates that at least 600 men, women, children, and babies, or about one-sixth of the population throughout the Gulf region, were murdered during the establishment of the frontier.⁶

Massacre Hill, Massacre Waterfall, Massacre Creek, Cave Massacre, Uhr Massacre, Skeleton Creek, Flick Yard, Dunganminnie Spring, Irringa, Radjiji, Ganjarinjarri, Baladuna Waterhole, Yulbarra Creek, Waningirrinyi Waterhole, Murruba, Mawurra Cave, Gabugabuna, Coonjula Creek and Malakoff Creek are just some of the over 50 places where massacres were known to have occurred in the Gulf region.⁷

Settler colonisers were making it clear that there was no place for Aboriginal authority.

The Extractive Frontier

Today, the Gulf country is an extractive frontier. It is a place where settler governments and international capital work together to exert power to extract minerals and gas while in the process severing ecological connections, discarding toxic waste, erasing livelihoods and creating 'extractive subjects'.⁸

It remains a violent place for Aboriginal people. A place where the fast violence of invasion and dispossession has been replaced with a slow violence that 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'.⁹

The extractive frontier continues to be a place of battle, 'between short-termers who [...] arrive to extract, despoil, and depart and the long-termers who must live inside the ecological aftermath and must therefore weigh wealth differently in time's scales'.¹⁰

Slow violence Environmental Contamination

In 2006, McArthur River Mine—one of the world's largest zinc, lead and silver mines—currently owned by Glencore, gained approval from the Australian and NT Governments for a massive expansion of the mine, from an underground operation to an open cut pit in the bed of the McArthur River.¹¹

The NT and Australian governments' decision to approve the project was challenged in Court by Garrwa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa people. On 20 April 2006 the NT Supreme Court delivered a judgement in favour of the plaintiffs, finding that the NT Minister of Mines and Energy had used the wrong power to approve the change to open cut mining. On 4 May 2006, the NT Government passed legislation overriding the Court's decision, signing off on weak environmental regulations to allow for the expansion.

In 2013, Glencore was found to have contaminated fish with lead. The mine's Independent Monitor warned that levels of lead found in fish in the mine's diversion channel exceeded the maximum permitted by Food Standards Australia New Zealand. The permitted lead level was exceeded in 9 out of 10 fish caught, with the lead testing similar to that found at the mine site.¹²

In 2014, Glencore's massive waste rock dump belched clouds of toxic sulphur dioxide for months across nearby Aboriginal homelands. In the same year, the mine's Independent Monitor found that the clay cap that was laid over the waste rock had been poorly compacted and would likely allow monsoonal rains to penetrate, reaching the potentially acid-forming rock below before leaching acid, saline and metalliferous drainage into the region's waterways.¹³

In 2015, 400 cattle were shot near McArthur River Mine after some had tested positive for lead.¹⁴

Throughout 2016 to 2018 the Independent Monitor continued to identify the long term management of the waste rock dump as a key issue given its potential to generate acid, saline and metalliferous drainage.¹⁵

Glencore's 2017 'Conceptual mine closure plan, Environmental Impact Statement' revealed that the waste rock dump that holds the acid forming material will have to be managed for at least 1000 years.¹⁶

In 2018, the NT Government told the residents of Garrwa 1 and Garrwa 2 town camps at Borroloola not to drink, cook, or brush their teeth with the camps' drinking water because it was contaminated with lead. The source of the lead contamination remains unclear.¹⁷

Since 2018, there have been no Independent Monitor's reports that audit the mines environmental performance.

In 2020, despite the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority rejecting Glencore's Authority Certificate and requesting more consultations with custodians and traditional owners, the NT Government approved a new Mine Management Plan, allowing Glencore to double the size of its open cut pit and waste rock dump.

Also in 2020, even though the mine will double in size, the NT Government and Glencore quietly cut the environmental bond which is held in trust to cover the clean-up of the mine by 120 million dollars, shrinking the environmental bond from 520 million dollars to only 400 million dollars. This is not nearly enough to cover a 1000 year clean-up and management timeframe that Glencore envisages.¹⁸

Slow violence Lead in Our Bodies

Lead poisoning occurs when lead builds up in the body, often over months or years. Even very small amounts of lead can cause serious health problems, especially for children younger than 6 years of age. These health problems can severely affect the mental and physical development of children, but may not be obvious immediately. Lead poisoning is also linked to kidney disease, infertility and miscarriages in adults.

Lead in my grandmother's body is a collaborative exhibition from Borroloola. Through portraits, paintings and a timeline the exhibition makes the connection between the fast violence of the Gulf massacres (1870–1910) and the slow violence of today, where lead, from poorly regulated mining, contaminates Aboriginal people's food, water and perhaps, even their own bodies.

As Garrwa elder Nancy McDinny reminds us: 'It's not the first time they put lead in our bodies. They put lead in my grandmother's body when they shot our families'.

Lead in my Grandmother's body is an act of truth telling. It brings stories of past violence and injustice from the margins of Australia's history to the centre. It seeks to halt the slow violence of lead contamination and future acid, saline and metalliferous drainage from poorly regulated mining into the region's waterways. To ensure that both fast and slow violence no longer remains unseen and out of sight, Garrwa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa people, in a series of 29 portraits by Therese Ritchie, use 'the bullet', as a mnemonic, remembering the state-sanctioned violence of the past inflicted on their ancestors.

Jacky Green, Nancy McDinny and Stewart Hoosan through their paintings tell the history and stories of their Countries and people. Nancy McDinny and Stewart Hoosan document the stories of the fast violence inflicted on the grandparents and great grandparents and Aboriginal defiance.

Jacky Green's work focuses on the slow violence Aboriginal people are experiencing today, and will experience well into the distant future. He outlines how mining companies work with governments to undermine Aboriginal Law to create 'extractive subjects'.¹⁹ He captures how the Australian state sanctions poorly regulated mining that discards millions of tonnes of toxic waste into Aboriginal peoples' Country. And, how the ancestral lands

of Aboriginal people are opened up by Australian governments to allow hydraulic fracturing, putting at further risk sacred sites, water security and Indigenous futures.

A timeline, by Seán Kerins and Therese Ritchie, documents how settler colonisers, men and women of their time, deploy power by using law, policy and programs as tactics of dispossession to usurp Aboriginal peoples' lands and waters and suppress Indigenous sovereignty.

Lead in my grandmother's body challenges viewers to think differently about wealth, not as a short-term thing resulting from damaging extractive processes, but a wealth that is intergenerational, encompassing people, culture and Country that will sustain them all into deep futures. It seeks a just future where black lives matter, and the right of Indigenous self-determination, in line with international law, is recognised by Australian governments and international capitalists. It envisages a time when the Garrwa, Gudanji, Marra and Yanyuwa people are empowered to reclaim and develop their own laws, policies and programs to protect their lands, waters and sacred sites to secure a safe and just future for their children and grandchildren.

- 1 Roberts, T. 2009. Black-White Relations in the Gulf Country to 1950, *Blackheath History Forum*, Saturday 29 August.
- 2 Roberts, T., 2005. *Frontier justice: A history of the Gulf country to 1900*. University of Queensland Press.
- 3 Ibid 1, p. 9.
- 4 Roberts, T., 2009. The brutal truth: What happened in the Gulf Country. *The Monthly*, (Nov).
- 5 Ibid 4.
- 6 Ibid 4.
- 7 Ibid 2.
- 8 Frederiksen T, Himley M. 2020. 'Tactics of dispossession: Access, power, and subjectivity at the extractive frontier'. *Trans Inst Br Geogr*. 2020; 45:50–64.
- 9 Nixon, R., 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press. P. 9.
- 10 Ibid 9, p. 17.
- 11 Howey, K., 2010. The Northern Territory and the McArthur River Mine. In Mills, Mines and Other Controversies: *The Environmental Assessment of Major Projects*. Federation Press Sydney.
- 12 ERIAS Group. 2014. McArthur River Mine Independent Monitor Environmental Performance Annual Report 2012–2013, Report to the Minister for Mines and Energy, Department of Mines and Energy. Melbourne: ERIAS Group, p. 193.
- 13 ERIAS Group 2016. Independent Monitor Community Report, McArthur River Mine, November, p. 9.
- 14 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015. *EDO NT points finger at McArthur River Mine over potential contamination of more than 400 cattle*, 24 August.
- 15 ERIAS Group 2017. *Independent Monitor Community Report, McArthur River Mine*, December. ERIAS Group 2018. Independent Monitor Community Report, McArthur River Mine, November.
- 16 Glencore, 2017. *Overburden Management Project, Conceptual Mine Closure Plan, Environmental Impact Statement*, March. McArthur River Mining.
- 17 NT Government, 2018. Safety advice for drinking water, Advice No. 1. Department of Health, 19 April.
- 18 Thompson, J. NT Government shaves \$120 million of McArthur River Mine environmental security bond, The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 21 Nov.
- 19 Ibid 8.