Shifting sands: Indigenous conceptions of health and place in fragile times

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ABSTRACT

Place and health are deeply interconnected for Indigenous people, and place-based services have been established to better meet people's needs. The meaning of place, however, remains difficult to define, an issue compounded by non-Indigenous settler attempts to erase people's association with place. This paper argues that we must understand place as something more than a geographical locality, and consider the histories, experiences and feelings that connect people to place in the south coast of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The paper focuses on the role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) as place-based entities which deliver a range of health and social services to local Aboriginal communities across Australia. This study was undertaken during a period of crisis when places and people's capacity to remain connected to them was perilous due to the 2019/20 bushfires, named in the media as the Black Summer Bushfires. The experience of living through this disastrous period elevated the importance of ACCOs and their unique and deep engagement with the communities they serve.

1. Introduction

> I am sitting on a plane.
>
> My Country is burning.
>
> I am crying.
>
> (Author 3, personal reflections)

The language of place has become increasingly common in policy discourse (for example, Klepac et al., 2023). Administrative policy adopts place-based terminology, which is embedded in an understanding of place as a locality, and as a way of addressing health and social issues with disadvantaged communities. Used ubiquitously, place-based terminology references a specific geographical location defined with administrative boundaries. These boundaries set the parameters of policy and determine the shape of service provision to the communities

located within those physical boundaries. These definitions which describe place as a definable locality, simplify the ideas encapsulated in current definitions of place that include the understandings and actions that people through their relationships make such that, places become meaningful (Cresswell 2015). Talking from a non-Indigenous standpoint, Cresswell observes that place is a ubiquitous concept "but no one quite knows what they are talking about when we are talking about place" (2015:6).

We argue that this terminology of place-based may be very different to the understandings of the people who access these services. This is particularly pertinent for Indigenous community-based services which are embedded within community but are also connected to the lands and communities that they serve. This disjuncture between policy and Indigenous perspectives is an important distinction articulated throughout this discussion.

In this paper we expand the notion of place, drawing from our

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research where we have explored Aboriginal conceptions of, and relationships to, place in south-eastern New South Wales. Furthermore, we explore the vital connection between Aboriginal relationalities to place, and connections to health and wellbeing. Specifically, this Australian Research Council funded research (IN190100026), looks at the importance, meaning and value of place-based services for Aboriginal people. The study is part of a larger project to develop a place-based model that is more inclusive of the meanings and priorities that Aboriginal communities attach to place and provides a basis for community-driven, and community-led solutions in the form of programs and policies.

We focus on the Aboriginal communities along the south-eastern coast of NSW, communities that are usually seen as a group of barely connected coastal towns, where the rich web of interconnections, shared histories and experiences and relationships to land are invisible to the uninformed. We argue that we need to reconceptualise the urban and regional places where Indigenous people have always lived. Employing an Indigenous lens enriches our understanding of place and provides insights into the deep cultural connections to place that underlie and enhance the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in regional areas.

This research set out to explore the ways in which Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) address the complex, inter-related, health and social issues confronting their local communities, and contribute to Aboriginal health and wellbeing. We begin by exploring the published literature to find out what is known about how 'places' are understood by Aboriginal people. Indigenous scholars in Australia and internationally have written about place and its relationship to health and wellbeing. Then, through the investigation of an in-depth study of Aboriginal communities in urban and regional south-eastern NSW, we discuss how the meanings attached to place relate to health. In doing so, we contrast these meanings with what is intended, and what is delivered by government in 'place-based' policy.

Complexity and fragility are at the heart of this account. To further explore the relationship between place, health, and wellbeing, we describe Aboriginal people's perceptions of place and its relationships to health in south-eastern NSW over time. These relationships have been shaped throughout the colonial history of Australia through their appropriation of place, and by deliberate strategies of erasure by non-Indigenous colonisers, including the erection of monuments that tell a different story of relationship to place, from their perspective.

Finally, we consider these issues in an age of precarity, and focus on the 2019/2020 bushfires and the challenges these caused to connection with place and Aboriginal health and wellbeing. Our aim is to show the complexity of place and people's deep emotional connections which cannot be captured in the understanding of place as a bounded locality. Deeply embedded in lived experiences of place, where boundaries may be fluid and based on interconnections, Indigenous cultural relationships, and ways of knowing differ significantly from western understandings of place as defined by geographical location linked to services and industry, which is frequently the definition under which services are delivered and provided in Australia.

2. Our approach

Writing this manuscript has been an exercise of collaborative thinking and discussions (Fredericks et al., 2014; Bainbridge et al., 2016). We are an interdisciplinary team of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers working in collaboration with ACCOs in south-eastern NSW. We describe our approach to this writing project as collaborative process (or praxis) (Fredericks et al., 2014). Succinctly expressed by Wooltorton et al. (2020, p.17), the writing process has been iterative and "nicely messy". Our collaborative method has involved lengthy reflective meetings, via tele and video conferences, to tease out the meanings of language, landscape experiences or concepts as they applied to our research topic.

Our collective and extensive experience as researchers and community members has been integral to this collaborative process. This has

occurred through ongoing conversations with grassroots community organisations and yarns with community partners enabling us to explore complex and multifaceted ideas involving our observations of the realities of working closely and sharing the experience of living through bushfires, floods, and COVID-19. We reflected deeply on how, after experiencing such devastation, communities return to place. We drew on our own reflections on their sources of strength, resistance, resurgence, and participation in community. These reflections allow us to retain our focus on the key area of inquiry, the role of place in maintaining health and wellbeing.

Our understandings were informed by a critical narrative review of key academic literature where we drew on a variety of forms of literature to broadly highlight the importance of place to Indigenous people. We also drew on the emerging grey literature, documentary evidence, our previous studies, and history of ACCOs, and mapped connections in the Aboriginal landscape to the areas of interest of south-eastern NSW as well as undertaking regional services-mapping from a regional perspective.

The paper draws on two additional sources of data. Firstly, with the consent of the participants, we utilized the transcripts from a series of recorded educational interviews with significant Elders of the south coast of NSW. Secondly, we drew on data collected through community mapping and yarns in four locations across south-eastern NSW. The results of this data collection have also been published separately (Clapham et al., 2024). Ethical approval for the research was granted for this project by the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC) Ethics Committee (Reference number 1608/19) and ratified by the University of Wollongong (Reference number HREC, 2020/115). We bring this body of data together to provide a comprehensive qualitative understanding of place, which privileges the lived experience of those who live and work in these places.

3. A conceptual framework for a place-based model

Over the past three decades, and at a global level, Indigenous scholarship has brought sophistication to academic literature. This is reflected in an extensive academic body of work on Indigenous research methodologies (Smith 1999; Kovach 2021; Wilson 2008; Nakata 2007; Fredericks 2009; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003). Long decolonisation (Sherwood, 2010), critical race theory (Pérez Huber 2016, whiteness studies (Moreton-Robinson, 2004) and data collection methods (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Kovach 2021; Walter and Andersen, 2013). Indigenous research leaders, over the past few decades have created the opportunity for a new paradigm in Indigenous research in Australia and elsewhere. Nakata (2007), for example, speaks of Indigenous researchers being at the cultural interface, intersecting and traversing the 'space' between living the life of an Indigenous person, being part of an Indigenous community and actively being part of the western research world. Fredericks (2009) suggests a process by which research with Indigenous Australians should occur by acknowledging the link between research and the political struggle remaining present. Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) provide a conceptual framework which allows us to honour Indigenous ways of life and recognise Indigenous world views. An expanding body of literature is working towards theorizing the "contextual conditions that impact communities of color" which urge us to "strategically organize" our scholarship with contemporary movements that forge ahead efforts for social and racial justice (Perez Huber, 2016 p.215).

There has also been emergence of writing by Indigenous scholars, providing a cultural basis for moving forward and broadening our understanding of the way in which meaning is deeply embedded in places and spaces for Indigenous people, these are ways which are commonly overlooked or remain unseen in policy (Basso 1996; Deloria 1969, 1993, 1997, 2002; Lee-Morgan, 2019; Archibald 2008). Although we draw selectively from this emerging literature, we also discuss below key ideas from Indigenous research methodologies and critical place theory.

In his classic study, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso (1996) describes how Navajo culture is embedded in the landscape in a timeless way, and where stories connect people to the landscape. The question of how people identify with their environment is interrogated in a broad multidisciplinary literature that spans critical geography, environmental studies, Indigenous studies (Tuck and McKenzie 2015) architecture (Leach 2002) and draws on critical and decolonizing theory. In their edited collection Tuck and McKenzie (2015: i) use the term "critical place inquiry" for this new field of research with its multiplicity of methodologies:

> *What matters is how the chosen methodology engages conceptually with place in order to mobilize methods that enable data collection and analysis that address place explicitly and politically. Unlike other approaches that attempt to superficially tag on Indigenous concerns, decolonizing conceptualizations of land and place and Indigenous methods are central, not peripheral, to practices of critical place inquiry* (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015: i).

The connection between place and story is further explored by well-known Indigenous academic, Margaret Kovach, who highlights the challenge for western thinking to appreciate the way story connects to place in a non-linear way:

> Place links present with past and our personal self with kinship groups. What we know flows through us from the 'echo of generations; and our knowledges cannot be universalised because they arise from our experience with our places. This is why name-place stories matter: they are repositories of science, they tell of relationships, they reveal history, and they hold our identity. (Kovach 2021, location 1080)

> Place names make theoretical notions concrete; they offer us tacit meaning. Stories, like name-place legends, give comfort and grounding, and offer the warmth of belonging. It is from here that we can reach out to the world. Stories connected to place are both about collectivist tribal orientation, and they are located within our personal knowing and conceptual framework of the world. (Kovach 2021, location 1094)

Fredericks (2009) locates her writing within the growing body of social and cultural geographic literature that explores notions of place, space, culture, race, and identity (Gelder and Jacobs 1995; Huggins et al., 1995; Jacobs 1995). Fredericks also unpacks the political nature of the intersection of these factors (McDowell, 1993a; McDowell 1993b), and draws attention to the physical and symbolic boundaries produced in urban places in relation to Indigenous identity (Fredericks 2013, Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Various disciplinary-based studies have utilized the connections between Indigenous connections to place, for example McKnight's studies of sharing Indigenous stories in an academic setting with pre-service teachers shows how this helps to build respectful relationships with Aboriginal people (McKnight 2013). Engaging in Aboriginal ways of knowing, learning, and behaving provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to initiate a relationship with Country to respectfully implement Aboriginal perspectives in their own teaching in pre-service teacher education (McKnight 2016).

4. Place based services: Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services

Over the past decade in Australia there has been a surge of interest in place-based approaches to policy (Gilbert, 2012; National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2024), following evidence of success across a range of international settings, in addressing complex or 'wicked' problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). The language of 'place-based' now permeates government policies and initiatives in Australia, across all policy sector and jurisdictions; it has particular importance in Indigenous policy and service contexts. As an approach to planning and delivery in Indigenous contexts place-based enjoys an elevated status as response and remedy to multi-faceted health and social policy dilemmas. Although there is no uniformly accepted definition of a 'place-based', a key element to the approach is that policies and programs are focused on specific geographical areas, which can involve all levels of government and the local community. However, rather than policies and programs being national or state-wide, they should respond to the specific needs of a particular place (CGRIS 2011:8, Gilbert 2012).

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) are incorporated organisations which are formed, based, and governed by local Indigenous communities with the focus of delivering holistic and culturally appropriate services in place. A sub-set of ACCOs are Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHOs or ACCHs) (Baba et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2000; Khoury 2015). There are 145 ACCHOs across Australia. Operated by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community boards, they are the largest employer of Indigenous Australians under the leadership of a peak body, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation 2018). The ACCHO sector provides a comprehensive model of primary health care which recognises the importance of culture and the connection to the social determinants of health. ACCHs services operationalise the NACCHO's broad holistic definition of health which includes its social, physical, emotional, and cultural aspects (National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation 2018).

Using unique approaches, Aboriginal community-led organisations have been able to achieve community ownership of holistic health and social programs in complex community settings and consequently optimize their long term and sustainable impacts on Aboriginal health and wellbeing. Strongly connected to place, ACCOs deliver a diverse range of programs and services for issues including clinical services, educational disadvantage, disengaged youth, men's and women's health issues, family wellbeing, child safety, social and emotional wellbeing, homelessness, law and justice and violence. Operating within a holistic Aboriginal cultural framework or set of principles and a pragmatic and flexible model of delivery, these programs and services enable access and engagement of Aboriginal services by the community whilst also providing leadership and capacity-building opportunities, all of which are critically important to local Aboriginal communities.

ACCOs have developed successful approaches, partnerships, programs, forms of community engagement and models of service delivery, in response to the specific needs identified by members of their local communities. Yet surprisingly few of these innovative models have been theoretically considered, documented, or evaluated. As part of our research, we addressed this gap in the literature by conducing program evaluations that demonstrate the positive impacts of a small, place-based, culturally based, Aboriginal community-led program for young Aboriginal students who experience difficulty with mainstream schools and highlight the importance of an Indigenous led collaborative approach to evaluation. (Clapham et al. 2022a; Clapham et al. (2022b); Sheppeard et al. (2022).

ACCOs have an important cultural brokerage role in the partnerships they form with government and non-government agencies. This role contributes to breaking down the traditional 'siloed' approach to the delivery of health and social services at the local and regional levels and potentially reduces costs to government across multiple portfolio areas, enabling the achievement of outcomes not easily captured in headline indicators. The lack of systematic research, evaluation or understanding of the vital role of ACCOs renders them invisible or insignificant and jeopardises their survival in a competitive funding environment.

5. Place and wellbeing

The relationship between health, wellbeing, and Country, for Aboriginal people, has been described in academic literature over the

past twenty years. Since the late 1990s, McDermott and colleagues have described favourable health outcomes of Aboriginal people who live in homelands communities compared to those living in more centralized settlements in Central Australia. (McDermott, O'Dea, Rowley, Knight and Burgess, 1998). Burgess and colleagues explored the association with and caring for Ancestral Lands and good Aboriginal health in Northern Australia (Burgess et al. 2005). Garnett et al. (2009) posit that the key to the health of Aboriginal people living in remote areas is connection to, and interaction with, 'Country' – land or sea to which they have an ancestral attachment. More recently, Senior, Chenhall and Daniels, describe the health benefits of outstations in remote area contexts and explore the ways in which its Aboriginal residents engage with a sense of place and their embodied experiences of living on an outstation (Senior et al., 2018). In contrast, there has been relatively little research that focuses on the importance of place for Aboriginal people living in the more urbanized regional areas of Australia (see for example Howard-Wagner, 2019, Kingsley et al., 2013; Kingsley et al., 2018; Kingsley et al. 2010).

6. Meaning embedded in places and spaces: A regional case study of south-eastern NSW

Place, how it is experienced and lived in, in an Indigenous context, differs fundamentally from the places identified in maps and the administrative boundaries, which shift and change through the progression of policy and administrative change. For example, Svalastog (2015) compares the maps of colonizing Europe to maps which represent the lived, dynamic, and seasonal experience of place of Nomadic Sami people in northern Scandinavia (2015:45).

Our research compared various maps showing government administrative (funding and service provision maps). These have different boundaries, that periodically change as governments change. For

example, Fig. 1 shows the NSW current map pf regional boundaries for funding and service provision. The area of our focus is the south coast which is the region south of the Sydney Metro Area, stretching from the south of Sydney to the Victorian boarder (NSW Government 2024) (see Fig. 2).

Aboriginal boundaries do not change. Aboriginal services provided by government are 'on place' but for Aboriginal people – services, organisations, staff, and community are 'in place'. Being in-place and the range of different meanings of place is summarised by *Aunty Laklak Burarrwanga, a Datiwuy Elder, Caretaker for Gumatj*:

> Country has many layers of meaning. It incorporates people, animals, plants, water and land. But Country is more than just people and things, it is also what connects them to each other and to multiple spiritual and symbolic realms. It relates to laws, custom, movement, song, knowledges, relationships, histories, presents, futures, and spirit beings. Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can itself communicate, feel, and take action.

> Country for us is alive with story, law, power, and kinship relations that join not only people to each other but link people, ancestors, place, animals, rocks, plants, stories and songs within land and sea. So you see, knowledge about Country is important because it's about how and where you fit within the world and how you connect to others and to place.

(Burarrwanga et al., 2013:54).

During community workshops conducted in various locations in south-eastern NSW, we encouraged people to create their own maps of the places that they were connected to. These group activities involved a combination of memory work, storytelling, and painting representations on a large canvas. For example, at Jigamy farm near the far south coast town of Eden, workshop participants mapped thousands of years of
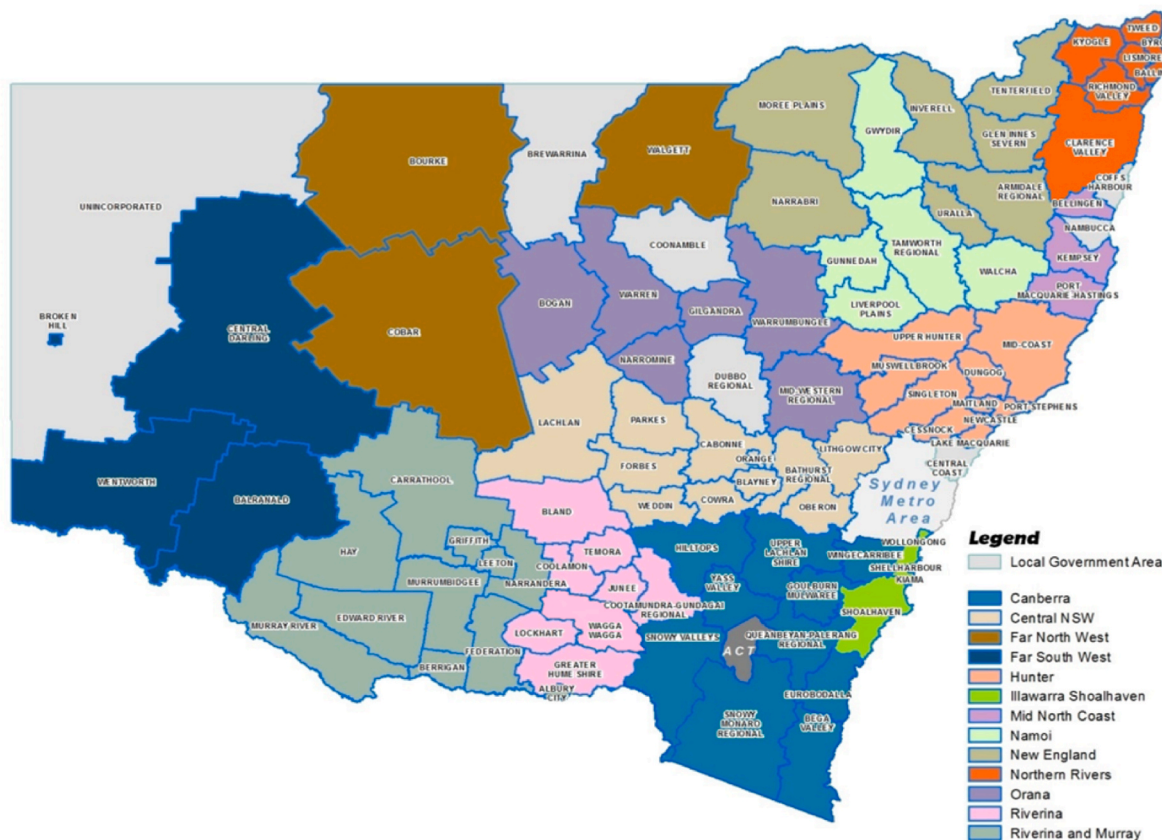

Fig. 1. Sourced from NSW Government, 2024

Fig. 2. Completed Jigamy Farm map.

history, through painting shell middens, they drew cultural practices and reflected the hard work of developing and clearing the land (Clapham et al., 2024). As a result, they created a map deeply embedded with meaning, and very different to the geographical representations of administrative regions. Importantly the Jigamy map epitomised Soren et al.'s (2017, 1) definition of place as "bringing human and non-human communities into the shared predicaments of life, livelihood and land". The map depicted people's symbiotic relationships with whales, the long history of shellfish harvesting, oyster production and the hunting of Bogon Moths to support ceremonial activities.

The relationships on the map extend far beyond the local geographical area (the Eden coast and Lake Pambula) to connect with other groups in the mountains.

The First Nations people of the south coast of Australia were the first contact site when Captain James Cook rowed ashore in 1788. Despite the rupture which this event caused in terms of people's connection to Country, there remain Elders and knowledge-holders who carry the stories of Country, culture, and language of the south coast. Each group have their own stories of their Ancestral History. As Pop Mac, a Yuin Elder, from the south coast explains:

> the Yuin Nation boundary lines goes from the Hawksbury River down to the Victorian border however, there are different perspectives and the nations that are predominantly known are; Gadigal, Eora, Dharrawal, Wodi Wodi, Wandi Wandandian, Darug, Jerrinja and Walbunja. (Pop Mac, 2021)

The contested boundaries, that south coast Aboriginal people face, due to colonisation and the sustained attacks on culture, land, and language, also impact how meaning is defined within place. However, there is still rich cultural heritage evident on the south coast and 'mobs' (the colloquial term for Aboriginal family and tribal groups) are taking initiatives to protect and preserve what remains. As Aunty Lorraine Brown of the Coomaditchie community, says:

> You don't have to travel the world; we've got 40–60 thousand years of culture that's still living here in Australia … And this Country was owned by our people, whether people want to believe it or not. What we tell a lot of people is that this is an old Country but we've only

been conquered for two hundred years plus. And our stone aged people have still got our cultures still within us. Even though we might be a contemporary society (urbanised) urbanised Koories whatever, but we still hold our culture. And you can't take the culture out of the people. (Lorraine Brown and Elder, 2021)

This is a powerful statement and reminder that Aboriginal people of south-eastern NSW have the sovereign right to Country, place and owning their identity and in asserting their right as traditional knowledge holders.

To understand the meaning of place one must first understand the connection of the spiritual essence of Country and learn the Dreaming stories behind the land formations, rivers, seas, plants, and animals. It is about knowing the creation and Dreaming of a place, where Spiritual Beings enforced lore, where humans were given the responsibility as caretakers of Country as Pop Mac says:

> Most importantly Country plays the part where, if we are carrying those stories that have been passed down from the DNA form the first sunrise, you have all that knowledge. When you put ochre on and dance, ochre is the sweat from the land that reunites with the flesh and brings back the spiritual … in the way we see things. (Pop Mac, Yuin Elder, 2021)

As Pop Mac explains, First Nations people do not see themselves as superior to or owning the land, rather, there is the understanding that they co-existed with and are part of the land as caretakers. As humans they are also spiritual beings and are connected to the essence of Country, animals, sky, ocean, and rivers. The landscape provides a rich literature, but this has not been included or visible in the western narratives about Country. For the First Nations people of the south coast of NSW there are prominent stories that are embedded in the landscape, such as story of Gulaga, The Five Islands, Geera, Gadu, Bundoola, Cullunghutti and the many stories of the birds and animals. The power of landscapes and story instil and re-enforce the continuity of culture, belonging, and the meaning and connection to place is enforced.

Knowing the significance of Country and the landscape, First Nations' people one can then apply the knowledge given through oral traditions and take on the responsibility of a caretaker role as First

Nations people do. As described by Yuin Elder, Uncle Ossie Cruse:

> We were custodians of the land and "custodian" means that we had looked after and sheltered and looked after the land proper – we didn't destroy it, we didn't overuse it. We made sure that it would reproduce and bring to life the things that were just necessary for our daily use. We didn't want to be making a destruction of things – showing people that we were people who didn't respect our culture and our lifestyle. (Uncle Ossie Cruse, 2021)

Regardless of where they live, when Aboriginal people speak of 'going home', it is the home or Country to which they belong. The importance of Country is highlighted in the movement towards traditional language revitalisation, ceremony, and song. The regaining of Indigenous language and knowledge is particularly important for young Aboriginal people, whose parents and grandparents may have experienced attacks on knowledge and disconnection from Country and Culture (Alfonso-Gregorio, 2022). This is being played out in contemporary music and performance. The deep connection to Country is increasingly being articulated in popular Indigenous culture, for example, by Aboriginal-Filipino Rapper, DOBBY, (Ford, 2020), who, in his song Language is in the Land, DOBBY sings,

> If the language is in the land, then the narrative is in the soul. (DOBBY, Language is in the Land)

7. Attempts at erasure

Our group reflected on the glorification of those who colonised Australia, symbolically enacted through the erection of monuments in certain places, and the reaction to this by Indigenous Australians in recent years. Colonisation and taking possession of the landscape was largely unnoticed by Australians in past decades. But a recent resurgence of resistance echoed across the globe. The year 2020 saw the removal of the Captain James Cook statues in many parts of Australia, including Sydney's Hyde Park, Stradbroke Island and Cairns. In 2022, the Statue of William Crowther, a Tasmanian Premier, was removed due to his theft of the skull of Aboriginal man William Lanne from a Hobart morgue in 1869 (Australian Associated Press 2022).

Longbottom draws attention to the way in which colonialist statues are markers of place with specific meaning to a group of people who seek to erase the meaning of place for the original inhabitants. She refers to the recently erected installations commemorating south coast colonialists, Alexander and David Berry, near the town named in honour of these men. Longbottom describes displacement as "a strategy which wipes away our history and stories, by replacing over the top a narrative of a white settler who stole land along with the bodies of Aboriginal people". Such markers may be seen as attempts to make Indigenous people outcasts in their own land.

Fredericks (2020) argues that:

> Non-Indigenous dominance of the landscape has occurred through colonisation, but the realities of Indigenous places and Indigenous ownership remains unchanged. Indigenous ownership continues, despite the multistorey buildings, roads, sports grounds, houses, and places of workshop built in specific locations. It exists regardless of whether individuals claim ownership and hold title deeds over places. (p.2/19)

This idea also relates to 'palimpsest' where attempts at erasure are not entirely successful (Bessarab 2017). The timelessness of Indigenous relationships with land contrasts with and transcends the colonial narrative. Indigenous culture, like the shifting sands of place, doesn't change. It is not about re-writing history. Names, stories, don't change – that is the message. These are transcribed in the landscape, stories and memories of the Elders.

8. The complexity, fragility and resilience of place: the 2019/20 bushfires

Since 2019, the ensuing years have been characterized by unimaginable change. But despite social and economic upheaval caused by catastrophic bushfires, floods the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic recession, followed by inflation and increasing interest rates, the value of place to Aboriginal people remains constant. The year 2019 was a catalyst where the nation's focus rapidly shifted to better understand how Aboriginal communities and organisations responded to these changes in practical terms, because of the disastrous bushfires in the South Coast region. We also sought to theorize the changing conceptualisations of the relationship between place and wellbeing within the context of crisis. We argue that periods of crises open an opportunity for a wider discourse on the meaning of place and its importance for health and wellbeing and greater possibilities to articulate, what may have been to many, an abstract concept of place and its meaning.

We know the importance of place for health and wellbeing in Indigenous contexts, but what happens when the existence of that place is threatened? We explored how Indigenous communities grounded in place negotiate health and wellbeing, so grounded in place, when their precious places become fragile and vulnerable, threatened by the vicissitudes of climate change, bushfire, floods, and pandemic.

On the January 30, 2019, a series of bushfires on the south coast of Australia merged to form the Currowan bushfire. This fire covered the area between Bateman's Bay in the south through to Nowra in the north. By the time the fires were finally extinguished on the February 8, 2020, they had burnt 258,000 ha of land, including several towns. The south coast of NSW is popularly experienced as a summer playground for people from the cities of Canberra and Sydney, with the population doubling during the summer months. During the bushfire, large numbers of trapped tourists greatly added to the complexity of managing the bushfire response.

9. Grieving for place

These events, however terrible, provide a platform for non-indigenous Australians to gain a sense of how Indigenous people think about place in a different way. The bushfires and their aftermath opened the possibility of a wider discourse on the meaning of place and its importance for health and wellbeing.

The coastal towns of south-eastern NSW are part of a long-held attachment to place and encompass a string of childhood and family memories of generations of Australian tourists. Not only did many holiday makers get trapped by the fires, but they were also forced to consider the effect of the bushfires on places that they had developed an affinity with over many years. This is reflected in the social media reports of that time. An example is the blog post in The Beagle (The Beagle, 2020), 'Eurobodalla's free and independent online news' which reports on two videos circulated on YouTube, "response from Canberra" (39 k views) to the "Batemans Bay video calling Canberrans to come back to the coast" (31 k views). The blog post includes the statement below,

> The south coast is important to us and holds a special place in our hearts ((https://www.beagleweekly.com.au/post/dear-south-coast)

In another example, from Domain, an online publication with an audience across Australia, Stolz writes,

> In the aftermath of the searing fires that torched many of our beloved towns people ae still wrestling with the notion of "how do I help? (Stolz, 2020)

The bushfires provided a platform to think about place in different ways, but this discourse remained only partially realized because within this public outpouring of grief, the experience of people who live on the south coast and, most specifically, Indigenous people remained invisible. The opportunity to discuss how such disasters affect people whose

relationship with Country is far deeper than a holiday connection was not realized. These differing experiences is articulated well by Albrect who separates 'nostalgia' – a temporal yearning for something that is lost from 'solastalgia' which he defines as:

> The pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its trans-formation. In short solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at home (Albrect, 2020).

One of the authors of this paper (ML) who is connected to Yuin Country, shares her experiences of the bushfires saying how they pre-sented a challenge that extended beyond the landscape and building devastation. Extending from the work of Dudgeon et al. (2020), Long-bottom describes this as being heart sore, the grief that she felt while being absent from family and Country and her feelings of helplessness when she could not be present to assist her community.

> At the time of the bushfire of New Year's Eve I was returning to the United States and located at the international airport in Sydney. The city of Sydney was covered with a blanket of smoke, I couldn't see the buildings that are usually visible. While at the same time, my beloved Yuin Country was literally burning to the ground. This summer was something I hope to never experience again with my family, and I separated I felt a sense of helplessness, I was not on site to support or assist.

> Yuin Country is connected from La Perouse in Gadigal (or is it Bidi gal) Country in the north, traversing down through the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and Far South Coast of New South Wales. These parts of Country are a part of our song lines, our trading routes and the pathways our ancestors travelled since time immemorial. At the time of my departure, I had not heard from one of my cousins, who was surrounded by fire while at the same time, she had been switching her phone off intermittently to save battery power. It wasn't too long before two bushfires merged into one super fire. Just as I boarded the plane, my cousin messaged me. They were ok at that time. However, their lives were in a state of hypervigilance with the imminent threat and were about to evacuate their home.

> As my cousin and her family were preparing their home for the worst-case scenario, I was relieved that they were safe at that moment, however, at the same time, I was conflicted as the plane began to reverse from the gate. As the plane taxied onto the runway, I burst into tears. I tried to maintain my composure and be as quiet as I could, however I was overcome with an extremely heavy feeling of angst, helplessness, fear of the unknown and what could I do? My heart was sore. When I say my heart was sore, it literally was aching. I'm not sure if anyone else has experienced this, it was visceral. I was crying for family, the land, my ancestors and concerned about what might happen. Adding to this was a fear of the unknown and what I might find out upon my arrival at my destination and possibly what I would have to deal with if the worst-case scenario happened. Making this experience more frightful was not only the health and wellbeing of my cousin and her family, but also her sister's daughter, our niece, who was 38 weeks pregnant at the time. They were completely surrounded by bushfires.

> From here it was an angst riddled waiting period. I had a lot of thoughts running through my head, obviously the safety of my family along the coast, what could I do to help being so far away, and Yuin Country, my beloved Country was burned. Adding to the trauma were the posts on social media that contained pictures and videos of people fleeing their homes, mass evacuations to the beaches, and the animals being rescued or those who were caught in the fire. My cousin, her family and our heavily pregnant niece evacuated their

home, not to the emergency centre, but to the park that is beside the river. Their plan was to jump into the river if the superfire continued on its path. My family spent two nights by the river. With a reprieve in weather, their houses were spared damage and they were able to return home. (Author 3, personal reflections)

For the first two weeks of 2020, the communities of the South Coast were subject to a State of Emergency Declaration (The Guardian, 2020), giving extraordinary powers to the Rural Fire Commissioner, including forcibly evacuating people from their homes, closing roads, and pulling down infrastructure at risk of collapse. The region had previously been classified as being affected a natural disaster due to on-going bushfires since August 2019 (NSW Government 2019). Arguably the devastation and disconnection to place which ensued could have been lessoned had policy makers adhered to the advice of Aboriginal rangers about the ways in which to burn Country, as well as scientists who had predicted serious damage might ensue if this knowledge was ignored (Bardsley et al., 2019; O' Brien and Watson 2014; Skiba 2020). Some say these fires were a result of the ancestors cleansing the land and the belief that fires cleanse Country is deeply held (Petty et al., 2015). Research con-ducted exploring Indigenous leadership and participation in bushfire recovery, cultural burning, and land management (Robinson et al., 2021) after the bush fire crisis has argued for the imperative of incor-porating "locally informed Indigenous engagement processes to employ traditional owners in the preparation, response and recovery phases of bush fire management" (39). In other words, listening and working with people who have an intimate knowledge of place and what place re-quires to sustain wellbeing.

As Yuin Man Dan Morgan emphasised the practices of cultural burning has been used on the south coast of NSW for thousands of years (Keller, 2020). Yet these practices have been largely excluded from settler colonial relationships to Country. Cultural burning practices are being better recognised in the non-Indigenous 'mainstream', for example see World Wildlife Fund-Australia supporting Indigenous rangers with cultural burning (World Wildlife Fund-Australia, 2024).

Following the fires of 2019–20, the late Yuin Elder Uncle Max Dulumunmun (Uncle Max) guided the Bushfire Healing Project. Work-ing in areas of southeastern NSW and Gippsland Victoria this project replanted over 5000 trees and understory. As Uncle Max teaches, caring for the burnt Country involves a number of cultural practices. "This responsibility belongs to all people" as all of us, as Australians learn the responsibilities of caring Country (Harrison, cited in Amrita Australia, 2024).

10. Aboriginal place-based services and networks in times of crisis

Aboriginal community-controlled health services are underpinned by their mission to serve the need of the community. This is described by an ACCHO manager in the following way:

> Being community controlled it's about giving back to the commu-nity. It's about us as an Aboriginal organisation, community control, leading the way in health care for our people. We are very different from mainstream service. We don't have to change; what we are at home is who we are when we come to work and we were able to continue to practice our culture within our organisation.

This mission gives them the advantage over mainstream services of being able to understand their local community and to act and respond quickly to the needs of the community in a crisis, such as the 2019/2020 bushfires. The services were able to listen and collaborate with the community, in responding to their needs and quickly adapting their services.

The trauma from the fires was widespread, and the ACCOs played a vital role in bush fire recovery, including the provision of healing days and spaces for the community, which were designed to bring the

community members together to share their collective experiences in spaces which were safe. The ACCOs unwavering commitment to sustained community engagement throughout the bushfires exemplified their dedication to supporting community wellbeing through challenging times. The community engagement demonstrated by these services can be attributed to the strong relationships they have fostered with local communities over time.

For Aboriginal people, the bushfires illustrate the intimate connection between people and place, but also the continuing (since colonisation) threat to place. Reflecting on this, it became apparent that the experience of the bushfires is like Country helping us to think about what this place means. The vulnerability of place was depicted powerfully on the previously described community map of Jigamy. Farm. Right at the edge of the map, on the fence line of the property, the flames of the 2020 bushfire are drawn (Clapham et al., 2024) which threatened to destroy everything that they had built. Participants talked about being powerless – "we could only pray" – and the sudden wind change that saved the property. The completed Jigamy map is a multi-layered story embedded with thousands of years of history, the connection to land, people's individual stories of hard work and struggle underpinned by the sense that it could all be destroyed in an instant.

In the days after the Black Summer bushfires had devastated communities on the far South Coast of New South Wales, supermarket shelves were bare, and medications spoiled in refrigerators without power (Wellington, 2020). The fire had been through the community destroying local infrastructure. Communication networks and power supplies had been cut off. The community was in a state of panic and emergency shelters were full of tourists trying to flee fires leaving the local community to fend for themselves with little to no resources. Food was limited, fuel for vehicles were restricted. Tourists, who had available cash, were able to take food supplies from these communities back to their homes, leaving supermarket shelves depleted of goods for local communities.

The bush fire response demonstrated the importance and resilience of Aboriginal place-based services, in their ability to utilise networks and engage with the community. This is work that they have always done, but it was made visible, when other services were floundering. In response to the bushfires, the formal and informal networks of the Aboriginal communities kicked into gear and the efficacy of this collaborative response highlights the importance of place-based services which are deeply embedded in and trusted by the local community. A notable example was in January 2020 when food and other supplies were in urgent demand the bushfires, were transported from ACCOs in the upper south coast to communities in the affected regions of the far south coast. Staff from Aboriginal community-controlled services in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions delivered supplies of food and other necessary goods to their counterparts on the far south coast. Social media sources, such as Facebook (#nswbushfires) provided a vital means of communication for the Aboriginal community. There efforts were also noted in the national media,

Over the weekend, Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) began to receive online grocery donations that included essentials items such as bottled water, petrol vouchers, baby formula and tinned food. CEO of Illawarra AMS, Jingili and Larrakia man Kane Ellis, says the response from the public has been huge.

"It's just been amazing. We only put it out on social media on Sunday evening and Monday morning we were flooded with a whole heap of donations, it's just been constant the whole time," he said.

By Tuesday, the campaigners had asked people to stop donating as they had become overwhelmed. The donation drive has partnered with local south coast organisations like Waminda, a women's health service in Nowra, to help distribute the goods to communities. Mr Ellis said the groceries would directly assist Indigenous families who can no longer access the basic necessities.

"Some people have lost everything, some people lost their houses and they've just got the clothes on their back, some people still don't have power at the moment … Others are running really low in food and clean drinking water. From our point of view, the medical services area, we need to be looking at medications for our chronic disease clients," said Mr Ellis.

"People don't have access to insulin or their blood pressure medications so we're working on that also."

(Wellington, 2020)

This place -based response to crisis was also very evident in the response to the COVID 19 pandemic with examples demonstrating effective local responses nationwide (for example Finlay and Wenitong 2020; McCalman et al., 2021).

Long term affronts to people's relationship to place ensued, caused by major structural barriers such as the destruction of houses. Relocation was not an option for many Aboriginal people with such strong connection to place. At Mogo, one of the towns which was most severely affected by the fires, a number of houses managed by the Mogo Local Aboriginal Land Council burnt down, with many other properties damaged by smoke. Some people resisted being displaced due to the fires and others relocated staying with other family members who had not lost their homes in the fires. This was a choice not only driven by yearning for home and Country but the strong sense of attachment that people have for their Country and the reluctance to abandon their Country during this time of crisis.

The impact of the crises on Aboriginal communities in south-eastern NSW is far-reaching, with this devastating experience exacerbated by the ramifications of policy dissonance and the presumption that place and connections to place were known and understood in the processes of policy enactment, demonstrated by the response and reaction by 'mainstream' non-Aboriginal organisations and services that hold considerable influence and power. This presumption, and the range of actions that arose were not only based on an uninformed assumptions of knowing what place means for and to Aboriginal people but also resulted in poor outcomes for the local Aboriginal communities living in the area.

11. Discussion - ACCOs bushfires and the problematic and possibilities of place

In this paper we have explored the meaning of place for Indigenous people, when that place is neither geographically nor administratively bounded. We found that Indigenous connections to place are characterized by complexity, fluidity, and reflect deeply embedded stories, feelings, and emotion. Place is also about networks and connection, and the stories arising from the Jigamy Farm map which describe ceremonial connections reaching far beyond the coast that epitomise this understanding.

The complex layering of the connections between Indigenous people and place gives people strength and resilience, but it is also a fragile relationship, vulnerable to disruption and damage by natural disaster and human-inflicted crises. The eroding effect of more than two centuries of colonisation has limited the opportunities and possibilities for non-Indigenous people to comprehend the value and meaning of place for Aboriginal people in the south coast of NSW. However, we argue that the threats on our environment, including the catastrophic bushfires of 2019/20, make it imperative to grasp the vital importance of that connection and its relationship to health and wellbeing, through the discourse of place.

The focus for our project was on Aboriginal Community Health Services (ACHOs) within these settings and what role these place based services played in maintaining health and well-being. What we found was that Aboriginal Community Health Organisations are embedded within a community. The community is embedded in place. This

relationship is a healthy one, where both people and services gain strength from their connection to place which is the underpinning of their identity. As Deloria and Wildcat point out "to be Indigenous is to be of a place". ACHOs were uniquely placed to respond to crises such as the bush fires and the pandemic because they were in place, trusted, well known and well-networked in the community (Deloria and Wildcat, 1996).

In this paper we have identified that there is a 'mismatch' between how 'place' and 'place-based' is conceptualised in policy discourse and how 'place' and 'place-based' is lived and experienced by First Nations peoples. The latter is evident both in our research with Aboriginal people on the south coast of NSW and in the work of First Nations scholars both in Australia and internationally. (Authors, 2024; Fredericks, 2020, Tuck and McKenzie, 2015). Most importantly, there is a dissonance between the language of 'empowering' local communities, and the neoliberalist language of shared responsibility, language which has seamlessly and uncritically crept into ordinary discourse. Empowering suggests that communities are provided with an opportunity to provide holistic answers to their problems by communities giving them a degree of control and accountability (Centre for Public Impact, 2019).

The increasing awareness of the discourse around colonial versus Indigenous meanings reveals the gaps and dissonances between policy-speak around place-based and Aboriginal understandings of place which is leading Indigenous people to reclaim spaces across Australia. In normal times Place-based services regularly experience dissonance between policy and local definitions acutely because their position is at the interface of policy and community. This means that they are constantly having to translate and negotiate the meaning of place with government, policy, and non-Indigenous service providers. During the bushfire crisis the barriers caused by this dissonance was reduced due to the need to act quickly, providing a demonstration of the full potential of ACCOs to work effectively in place.

12. Conclusion

The value and meaning of place for Aboriginal people may be difficult for non-Indigenous people to comprehend but, we argue, that the emotions associated with place in relation to the bushfires and, more recently, the floods and the COVID-19 pandemic, not only revealed the ways in which Indigenous place-based services have had to continually negotiate increasingly complex conditions and the deep meanings and relationship that local Aboriginal people have with their communities. But these crises also provide the opportunity for non-Indigenous people to understand these deep connections and associations that Aboriginal people have with place that move beyond geographical boundaries and divisions, through their own feelings and experiences of pain and severance with places that they hold dear and have strong attachments to as holiday locations, home, and love of Country.

Place for Aboriginal people cannot be understood as a static geographic locality but rather as a network of connections, responsibilities, and relationships as demonstrated in the Jigamy example above. During the bushfires these long-established relationships and networks became the basis for a local and effective emergency response. Drawing on their networks and relationships the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations responded swiftly to the changing needs of people during and following this unprecedented tragedy.

In conclusion, the attachment and meaning of place for Aboriginal people has remained constant for thousands of years, despite the intrusion of colonisation, and as discussed, the stories and significance of place has not changed even with the carving up and renaming of land according to westernisation of boundaries. The recognition and importance of place to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people is not only central to policy development and decisions by government but is manifest in the important role played by Aboriginal place-based services in responding to local needs and crises. The recognition of the importance of place highlights the need by government to provide increased support to ACCOs who are essential in responding to and meeting the needs of local communities from a place-based response which is integral to the broader understanding of the significance of place for Aboriginal people across the non-Indigenous Australian community.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kathleen Clapham: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kate Senior:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Marlene Longbottom:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dawn Bessarab:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Bronwyn Fredericks:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Valerie Harwood:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Fiona Sheppeard:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation. **Bronte Haynes:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Kaitlen Wellington:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Peter Kelly:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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