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Indigenous and Cultural Folklore Informed Family Therapy Practices

Revisiting Genograms: First Nations Wisdoms

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ABSTRACT

Within family therapy training, genograms are taught as a core part of understanding and working with family relationships. Trainees also construct their own families of origin as a method of understanding the mechanics of the process and, more importantly, as a direct method of exploring the relational nature of psychological resources and psychological distress. This paper examines the cultural assumptions embedded in the conventional Western genogram and describes efforts to develop a culturally meaningful approach for First Nations family therapy students in Australia. Standardised genogram symbols may inadequately represent kinship systems that integrate Country, community, spirituality and postcolonial histories. We propose a reimagined genogram that incorporates context, story and artwork, moving beyond low-context symbolic conventions towards culturally resonant representations. In doing so, the genogram is not merely adapted but transformed—honouring Indigenous ways of knowing whilst retaining its systemic foundations. Underpinning this work is an ethic of two-way listening and learning between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers.

1 | Part 1

1.1 | The Genogram in Family Therapy

As a diagrammatic representation of family, genograms have long served as a 'go to' in the family therapist's toolbox of options for assessment and therapeutic practice. Genograms assist both practitioners and clients to consolidate known information and make new connections around issues connected to births, deaths, marriages and other intimate relationships, separations, migration and other significant family-related events.

Genograms map patterns between and across generations. They provide a contextual backdrop to family-related events and clues about how these events have shaped present family structures and relationships. The process of constructing a genogram has an immediacy and efficiency that can be difficult to achieve

when attempting to convey a family narrative in verbal or written form.

The genogram is generally thought to have originated in the 1960s and 1970s as part of Murray Bowen's development of family systems theory. It evolved from simple representations of the 'family tree' into a therapeutic tool for mapping multi-generational patterns of relationships, emotional processes and health-related issues (Stagoll and Lang 1980). Over the years, the genogram became both a diagnostic and therapeutic instrument in family therapy, helping therapists and families identify patterns of intergenerational strengths as well as more problematic issues such as family conflict, transmission of trauma and hereditary challenges.

The genogram was expanded upon conceptually by Murray Bowen's colleagues, Phillip Guerin and Thomas Fogarty

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Key Points

1. Conventional genograms, grounded in Western assumptions of family structures and kinship, offer a limited view that can marginalise and tell a deficit-based, de-contextualised story of the family. This perspective often places blame on the family and fails to account for the wider historical, political, cultural and societal context, including the devastating impact of colonisation in Australia. Families may subsequently feel disempowered by these conventions that represent a narrow understanding of family relationships. We invite teachers and practitioners to adopt a meta perspective, taking into consideration pre- and postcolonial family and community stories of strength, connection, resilience, injustice, grief, loss and trauma.
2. Indigenous trainees and families have unique relationships and understanding of Country, kinship and community, which should be told in ways that honour Indigenous sovereignty and story-telling and resonate with their lived and living experiences.
3. Non-Indigenous family therapy teachers and practitioners are invited to identify their own standpoint pedagogy and bring awareness to their assumptions. In doing so, teachers and practitioners might develop flexibility and creativity in adapting more culturally sound ways of working.
4. Within the teaching context, a reciprocal pedagogical process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners makes way for more culturally attuned and respectful ways of working where family therapy knowledge and healing practices are shared and co-created.
5. We *all* have something to gain when we work in respectful, curious and inclusive ways. As this paper highlights, engaging in culturally respectful ways that are more nuanced and relational benefits non-Indigenous and Indigenous trainees, practitioners and families.

(Guerin and Fogarty 1972) and standardised and further developed using universally comprehensible conventions by Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson (McGoldrick and Gerson 1985). With a range of colleagues, McGoldrick has continued to expand upon the theory and practical applications of the genogram (see McGoldrick et al. 1999, 2008, 2020). More recently, McGoldrick spoke to key aspects of her genogram journey in an interview published in ANZJFT (see Amorin-Woods 2024).

In therapeutic settings, genograms are best created collaboratively in the presence of family members. A collaborative process empowers family members to tell their stories to themselves and to each other and to share and ‘process’ the multiple perspectives that inevitably emerge. Importantly, the emerging and completed genogram provides an opportunity for family members to ‘zoom out’ and take a meta perspective, allowing for a more accessible identification of past and present patterns and for reflections on emerging dynamics. Although some past and present behaviours require acknowledgement of personal responsibility, and perhaps a personal

apology, taking a meta perspective can simultaneously soften feelings of anger and blame. This is because bigger, historically based reasons behind family struggles tend to become more visible. Understandings, forgiveness and opportunities for moving beyond past constraints then become more possible.

The information contained within the simple lines and symbols of the standard genogram can be both relieving and confronting. It may reveal knowledge of past and present events and relationships previously unavailable to one or more family members. It may also permit past knowledge to be viewed from new perspectives.

In shifting the main focus away from individual guilt or blame, the relational context of the genogram provides greater opportunities for collective growth and collective healing. At the same time, the emerging stories can be big in their content and big in their implications. For this reason, before significant readjustments can be made, processing of potential hurt and confusion may require time and close attention on the part of the therapist.

This means, in turn, that teaching the genogram requires more than merely attending to the mechanics of the process. The immediacy and the potential power of the relational information revealed places a heightened obligation on the therapist to engage empathically with all family members and to maintain throughout a spirit of compassion and respectful curiosity.

1.2 | The Genogram Within the Context of Family of Origin Training

1.2.1 | Mainstream Reflections

The authors of this paper are all associated with postgraduate family therapy training programs at The Bouverie Centre and the School of Psychology and Public Health, La Trobe University in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia.

Influenced by transgenerational and experiential therapists, family therapy training programs have a long tradition of exploring trainees’ own families of origin (McDaniel and Landau-Stanton 1991; Rober 2024; Young et al. 2003). Murray Bowen, for example, famously presented his own family of origin at a conference more than 50 years ago (see Bowen 1967). In this presentation, Bowen emphasised the importance of becoming differentiated from one’s own family of origin in order to increase effectiveness with families. In a similar fashion, Virginia Satir noted the way in which the person of the therapist influences therapeutic technique, whilst Carl Whittaker shared his family of origin stories in experiential family therapy (McDaniel and Landau-Stanton 1991).

Consistent with these observations, family of origin work has been identified as a key tool in navigating therapeutic impasses, developing empathy for family members and building sound and flexible therapeutic alliances (Crago 2024; Flaskas 2005, 2009; Mason et al. 2002; Rober 2024). For these reasons, genograms have, for many years, been introduced early in the family therapy training program at the Bouverie Centre. In the

spirit of understanding second-order cybernetics, developing self-reflexivity and developing a better appreciation of what we routinely ask of our client families, students are required to reflect on and share their own personal genogram with their class colleagues.

At Bouverie, teachers lead the way by sharing their own genograms, before expecting students to do the same. Students are then asked to present at least three generations of their family, identify themes and resources, reflect on the ways in which their families have shaped them as workers and reflect on the ways in which these understandings will empower them to be effective family therapists. The student group then provides feedback to their colleagues by sharing those themes from the presenter's story that have personally resonated with them.

1.2.2 | Towards a First Nations Genogram

Like many—perhaps *all*—therapeutic innovations, the genogram began life embedded in the mainstream cultural assumptions of the day. Over the years, in recognition of the need to better accommodate the diversity of lived family experiences and realities, therapists have expanded the original concept by creating variations such as the sexual genogram (Hof and Berman 1986), the gender genogram (Barrett et al. 2019), the spiritual genogram (Wiggins Frame 2000) and the cultural genogram (Hardy and Laszloffy 1995). Each of these initiatives, we suggest, speaks to the larger issue of how culture is 'accommodated' into the larger therapeutic project.

In 2010, one of us (Banu Moloney) travelled to Yorta Yorta Country, Shepparton, Victoria, to deliver to First Nations students the first Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy. Having taught family therapy for over 35 years, Banu was very familiar with the subject matter, including the importance and significance of incorporating genograms into family therapy practice.

Banu's years of experience as a family therapist and a teacher of family therapy also gave her confidence in her capacity to demonstrate how to put such key family therapy ideas and concepts into practice. She believed she could be sensitive to cultural relativities and would be able to effectively translate ideas that had evolved in Western family therapy centres and Western institutions into meaningful concepts for First Nations students.

She was wrong.

'Cultural safety is for everyone', was Banu's First Nations colleague, Robyne Latham's advice. 'Cultural safety comes as a consequence of genuinely honouring and respecting all cultures'.

Banu came to recognise that though her own experience of growing up had been multicultural and though she had had to adapt to a new set of cultural norms after migrating to Australia, she had not fully understood the meaning of Robyne's advice. As an educator, cultural safety required Banu to be transparent about herself as a person, about her own family connections and

about her cultural identity. She had not adequately appreciated, however, that for her and for her First Nations students, delivering such sensitive material required the services of a cultural guide. This came in the form of a First Nations colleague, Shaun Coade, who could monitor Banu's teaching, vouch for her in front of the First Nations community and when required, 'put her straight'.

In the Australian Broadcasting Commission Boyer Lectures (Pearson 2022), Noel Pearson framed Australia's identity as a weaving together of three strands—Indigenous heritage, British institutions and multicultural migration. Pearson suggested that for this reason, Indigenous peoples needed to acquire *cultural bilingualism*—that is, fluency in both their ancestral traditions and the dominant national systems. In terms of her teaching role, Banu came to develop a greater appreciation of the need for her students to achieve fluency in the coloniser's language, as she herself had done as a migrant to the country, without losing or diminishing their own culture in the process. Banu also came to more clearly understand what Ramsden (2002) had meant when, from her perspective as a health professional, she addressed the topic of cultural safety for Māori patients. She came to better appreciate Ramsden's observation that cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness are essential if cultural safety is to be achieved.

In the context of Australian First Nations people, Latham (Moloney et al. 2024) has also described the ways in which cultural safety must be addressed when working with First Nations families. Latham (personal communication) reiterated that unless there is a First Nations guide to vouch for the non-Indigenous educator, the educator will often be experienced as not safe and will not be accepted as a credible teacher. Even with the support of a guide, unless she shows genuine respect for and curiosity about First Nations knowledge and wisdoms, the educator remains an unsafe source of learning. In these circumstances, though they may remain polite in their interactions, First Nations students will not engage with the learning or the lecturer. More often, in our experience, students will simply not turn up to class.

1.3 | First Nations Students as Intuitive Systemic Thinkers

Bishop and Tynan (2022) acknowledge Australian Indigenous people as 'pattern thinkers' (pp. 595), schooled from the outset in understanding relational connectedness. Relational stories are passed through generations, mainly through oral communication, which makes use of Eagle (macro) and Ant (microscopic), Grandmother (past/present) and Granddaughter (present/future) temporal perspectives. Unsurprisingly, students of the Graduate Certificate of Family Therapy: First Nations are often intrinsically aware of systemic ways of knowing and healing in family therapy (Moloney 2014). As Brown and Larner (1992) also note, ancestral stories in which family members are connected to each other and to the broader environment have long been depicted orally and in Australian Indigenous art and ceremony.

At first glance, it appeared that the genogram would therefore be well suited to a course such as the Graduate Certificate of

Family Therapy: First Nations. But culture always intervenes, as it must! As non-Indigenous teachers, we needed to learn that genograms cannot simply be presented to First Nations students as a ‘tack on’ or as a minor adjustment to a mainstream program. As we discovered, a critical aspect of the teaching process must be the presentation of a ‘genogram’ that is fully culturally relevant.

Although Australian Indigenous kinship systems are inherently different to Western genealogical systems, cultural inappropriateness may not be immediately obvious. For example, it took us some time to accommodate to the fact that in First Nations families, aunties typically have the same status as mothers, whereas uncles may be related to as fathers. More broadly, Australian Indigenous kinship systems integrate Country and community, which in turn provide instructions for relational responsibilities, laws and spiritual governance (Dudgeon and Bray 2019; Tynan 2021). How then, should this be represented?

The journey towards answering this question involved appreciation of how a conventional Western-style genogram commonly constructs events such as separations, divorces, adoptions or ‘unexpected’ pregnancies as disruptions—or as movements away from an idealised version of family. Making genograms relevant and useful to First Nations people required those of us educated in Western approaches to family therapy to suspend such working assumptions. At almost every level, we needed to reflect seriously on what a culturally meaningful genogram might look like.

In the first instance, to be relevant to First Nations students, genograms need to reflect the high context culture of Australia’s Indigenous people. We began to see that for a culture that traditionally transmits knowledge and experiences through stories and art, conventional Western-style genograms, which are low in the expression of both art and context, were unlikely to be sufficiently engaging. Squares, circles and crosses, with little in the way of further contextual input, were simply too stark. In the form in which they are presented, these symbols say little or nothing of the qualities of the relevant individuals, their lived experiences and, importantly, the nuanced connections to family, community, land, seas and waterways. In short, they do not speak to the stories that give meaning to First Nations families and bind them together.

During Banu’s first experience of teaching the new course at Shepparton, her choice was to either soldier on and encourage her First Nations students to learn the traditional Western-style genogram as best they could or be curious regarding how and what symbolic expressions might tell the story of each First Nations student’s family, connections and experiences. This change was made more challenging by the fact that Banu had already accumulated many years as a therapist and lecturer in family therapy. It was tempting to simply pass on her hard-won knowledge like a runner would pass the baton on to the next competitor in the race.

Banu decided that she needed to approach her teaching in ways that drew out of these students the wisdom and knowledge they

already possessed. But embracing this opportunity also required a willingness to be respectful of what, as an educator, she could nonetheless bring to the learning process. Could she do this and be simultaneously respectful of what each student had to contribute? Sometime later, Banu was to articulate key aspects of this process (Moloney 2014).

Perhaps it was fortunate for Banu that the more collectivist culture in which she had spent her childhood seemed to overlap with some of the cultural assumptions that she imagined might inform these prospective students’ ways of knowing. She too, for example, came from a culture in which, in her language of origin, her mother’s sister was also referred to as her mother. Banu was also able to remind herself that it was the application of a collectivist, relationship-focused (rather than individualistic) framework to children’s mental health issues that had attracted her to systemic family therapy in the first place.

Banu came to recognise that the journey towards developing and delivering an appropriately balanced Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy: First Nations had begun with a ‘gut feeling’, yet be adequately articulated, that there would be synchronicities between the course content, the students’ ways of knowing and her own experience. From this mindset and approach to learning and with the enthusiastic cooperation of her students and colleagues, a First Nations approach to the genogram began to evolve.

2 | Part 2

2.1 | Representing First Nations Families: Context, Story and Artwork

The ‘Westernised’ genogram can be rich in personal meaning for an individual ‘Western’ family. For example, the oblique slash on the midpoint of a line connecting two family members can tell a highly meaningful story of separation or divorce, the consequences of which might reverberate over generations. A cross inside a circle can be equally arresting, representing, for example, the early death of a mother.

In a low-context culture, such representations are likely to be understood immediately. A simple symbol can pack within it a high amount of information. At the same time, if family members are part of a dominant culture in which status and a sense of belonging are largely unchallenged, the impact of broader social and historical events may be considered to be of little relevance. Symbols or other details related to servitude or oppression, for example, would rarely find expression in the structure of a ‘standardised’ genogram.

First Nations representations of family typically differ from this standardised approach. In the first instance, First Nations postcolonial experiences need to find meaningful representation in the genogram itself and also in the manner in which the genogram is co-constructed. And second, amongst First Nations people, expressions through art and stories are likely to be more recognisable and have greater immediacy than expressions generated through lines and standardised symbols alone.

The representations below contain examples of each of the above forms of genogram. Figure 1 depicts a genogram using conventional symbols, with the addition of important historical context and the consequences of these historical events. Figures 3 and 4 are art-related genograms, the meanings of which, we suggest, are likely to be more immediately accessible to First Nations people and First Nations families. These are considered in turn below.

2.2 | Adding Cultural Context to the ‘Standard’ Genogram

Figure 1 depicts a six-generation genogram produced by Aunty Judy Atkinson (Atkinson 2002). The genogram is shaped by the historical context of removals, massacres, sickness, starvation and loss of liberty. For these families, the personal impacts of

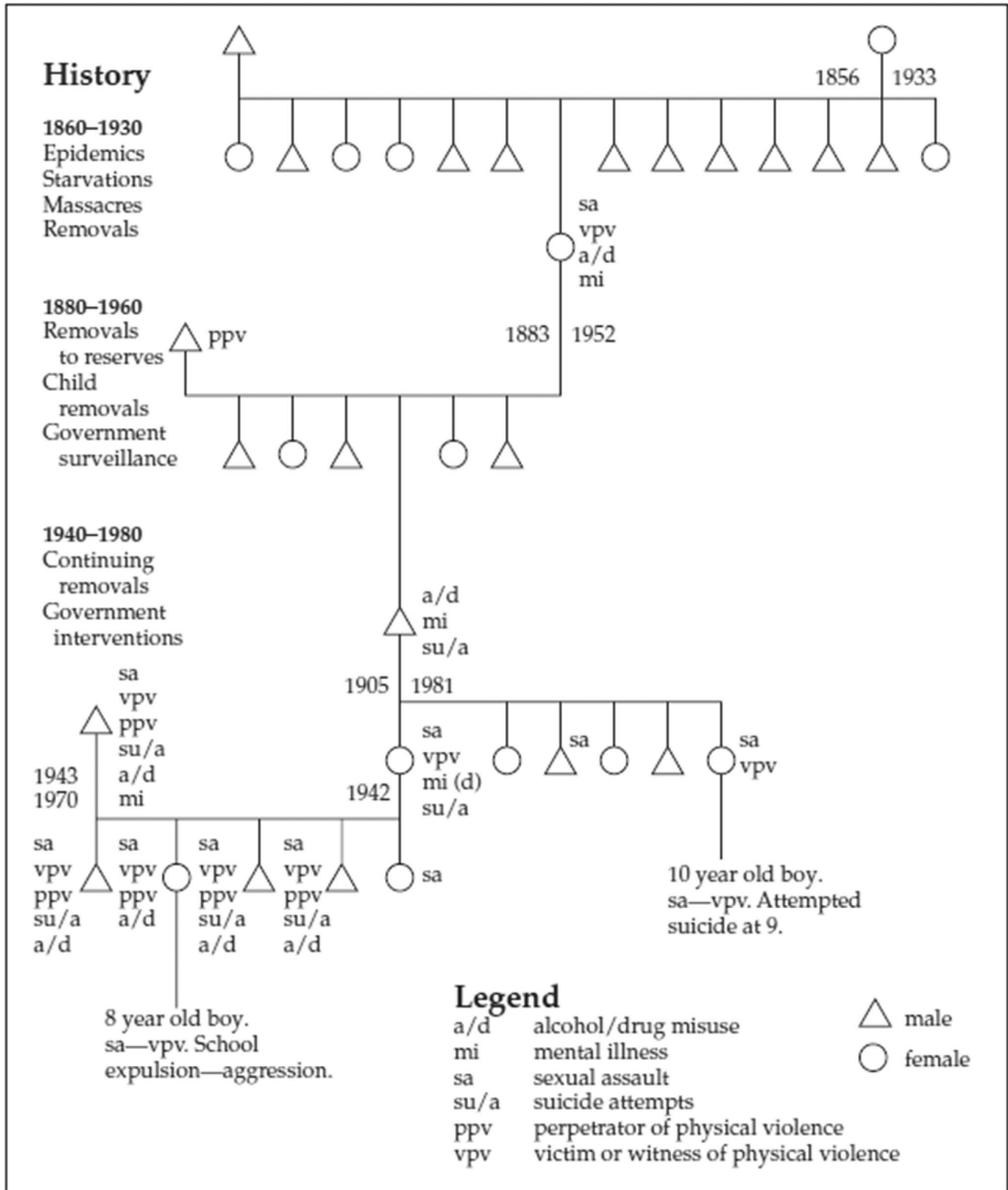


FIGURE 1 | Six Generation Genogram.



FIGURE 4 | Family Tree.

traditionally privileged family lineage and internal family dynamics, eco maps extend family relationships outwards to mark social supports (or in this case lack of them), environmental stressors and environmental connections.

Introduced by our First Nations colleague, Alison Elliott, and consistent with the broader focus depicted in the ecogram, Aunty Judy Atkinson's six-generation genogram became a critical contribution to the Bouverie First Nations Family Therapy course. As a student of the healing-focused work previously begun by Aunty Judy Atkinson, Alison had been introduced to the importance of acknowledging the impact of the frontier intrusions onto Aboriginal lands resulting in, at best, removal of communities from their lands and from each other, and at worst massacres of First Nations people. As part of her input into the Graduate Certificate in Family Therapy: First Nations, Alison highlighted the importance of story mapping with a cultural lens—in this case, adapting genograms so that they became more informative and at the

same time, more respectful, more 'true' and more safe for First Nations families.

In 2024, Archie Moore, Kamilaroi/Bigambul artist, became the first Australian to win the prestigious Golden Lion award for Best National Participation at La Biennale di Venezia for his artwork, *kith and kin*. Moore's earlier and related work, *Family Tree* (2021), is Moore's family genogram (see Figure 5). It speaks to identity, family and community, capturing the many violations of colonisation alongside the staggering reality of the roughly 2,500 generations of continuous culture, which is also Archie Moore's legacy.

The full-sized work occupies a wall space many meters in width and height and is rich in contextual detail. Beginning from with a square at the bottom which he marks as 'ME,' Moore names known family members over more recent generations. This consciously includes names that he and his family have been called - typically racist and derogatory names, or diminutive

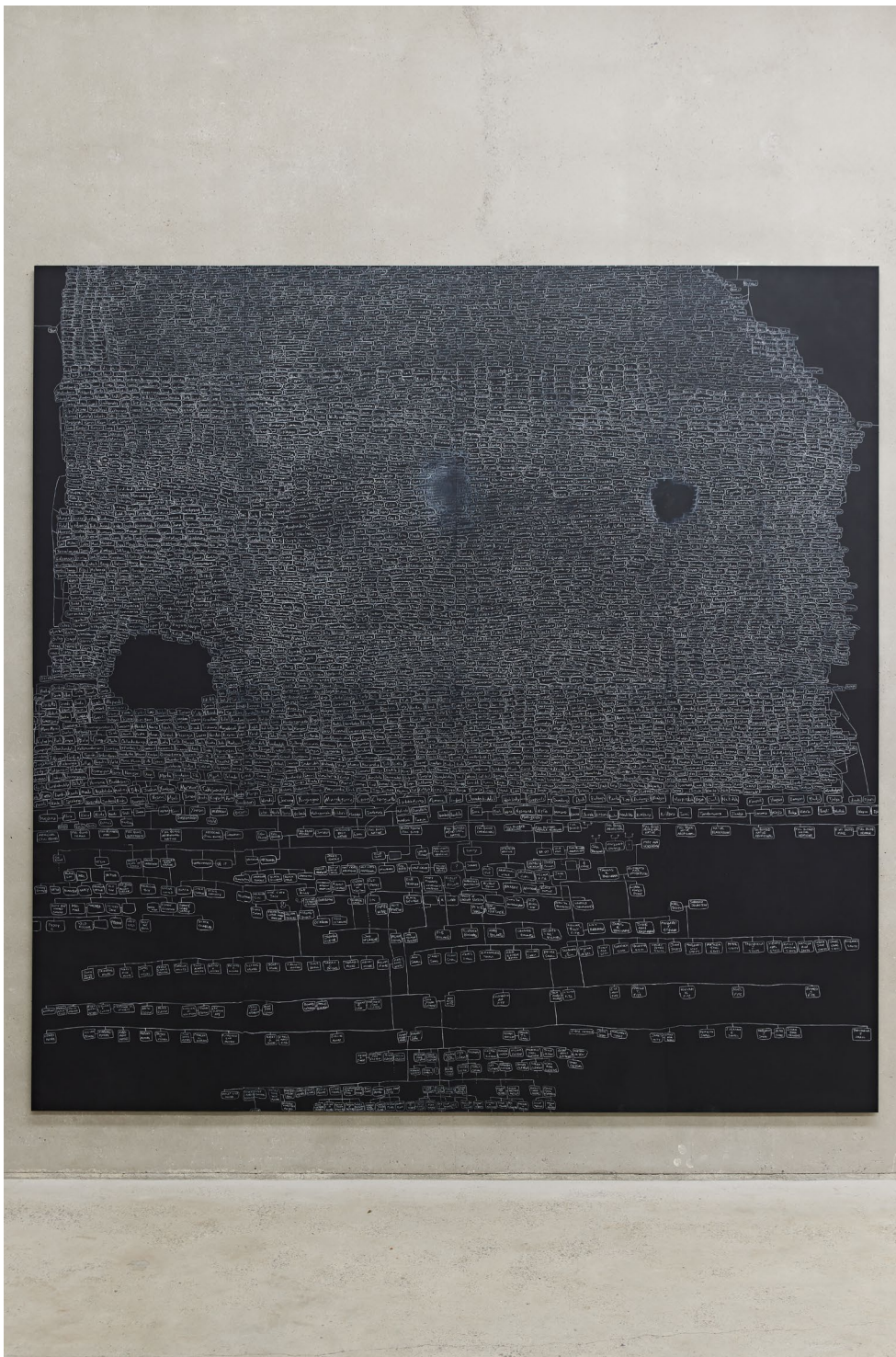


FIGURE 5 | Archie Moore, *Family Tree*, 2021, The Commercial, Sydney, image courtesy the artist and The Commercial. Photo credit: Nick de Lorenzo

names like ‘Tommy’ instead of Thomas, or Billy, instead of William, or ‘Jacky Jacky’. Earlier than that, there are no names at all - just descriptions such as ‘black male’, ‘full blown’ or ‘half cast’.

There are also singular Indigenous names, which as Moore notes, may or may not be his relatives. This is because the names are mainly speculative, the original Aboriginal names having

been largely lost through displacement, oppression and neglect. In addition, the genogram contains areas that might be construed as ‘black holes’. These could be interpreted in a variety of ways, including symbols of the loss of earlier family members through massacres, disease and missing archival information – all statements that speak to neglect, indifference and violence perpetrated against First Nations people following the arrival of the colonists.

Though both works employ some of the standard genogram conventions, there is no evidence that Moore drew inspiration from the family therapy literature or considered that his installations might be used in therapeutic settings. But though it is beyond the scope of this article, we suggest that Moore's installations, which integrate the family unit into ritual, Country and collective memories spanning more than 65,000 years, might well create a further healing backdrop for therapeutic work with First Nations families, who would recognise the history of externally imposed family fragmentation as well as the bigger, more sustaining picture of a culture that has thrived and survived for more years than any other on earth.

2.3 | Beyond Diagrammatic Representation: Art as Genogram

The first example of 'art as genogram', presented in Figure 2, is the work of Karen Doolan, Tagaluka and Gurang Gurang Artist and Family Therapist.

Based on a map of Aboriginal lands, which after more than 60,000 years of intensive human care and human management became known as 'Australia', Karen creates images of colonising practices that forcibly moved mobs out of their own countries. The moves were brutal in their execution, removing children and otherwise splitting families, destroying cultural practices and locating individuals in others' countries that were unknown to them and located many miles away.

The artwork includes significant totems, which were also ripped away from individuals' places of forced relocation. In Karen's painting, the real and symbolic focus on a destination known as Palm Island is a story known to many First Nations people. Many individuals were forcibly removed to this place, far away from their cultural or spiritual connection and far away from immediate and extended family members, often including their children.

For First Nations people, these forced removals were the equivalent of imprisonment. Indeed, for many, Palm Island became known as Punishment Island.

Embedded in Karen's genogram is the dominant story of forcibly fragmented families. The disconnections are such that representation via a standard Western genogram, with its focus on connections through (mainly) biological lineage, is likely to be of limited value. One way to address this is to add a colonial context along lines inserted by Aunty Judy Atkinson and Archie Moore. Another, which provides an especially powerful immediacy, is to address the dominant story through art.

Karen's artwork could be reproduced with many variations. For example, the displacements could be overlaid on a map that divided Australia into the multiple countries and nations that existed for millennia before colonisation.

There is of course no 'right' way of representing these events. That is the strength of representation through art and stories. In our view, Karen's choice of representation is stunning in the brutal simplicity of the message it sends. The underpinning narrative it represents helps make sense of the near-universal experience of

First Nations families. It serves to contextualise these experiences in ways that might legitimately elicit sadness and anger, whilst also having the potential for healing through recognition of the extraordinary strength it has taken for First Nations to survive.

2.3.1 | Creating the Genogram

Figure 3 is also Karen Doolan's genogram of her immediate family spanning the three past generations. In this image, Karen felt it was significant to depict the marrying of her mother's and father's family as two intertwining vines. The green leaves represent living family members, whereas the brown leaves represent those who have died. The pink leaves denote non-Aboriginal family members.

The second example of art as genogram can be found in Figure 4. This is the work of Yorta Yorta, Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri family therapist, Clarisse Slater, who has given permission for its inclusion. Below, Clarisse reflects first on the process of creating the genogram, on the genogram itself and on the impact of sharing the finished product with others.

I wanted to understand genograms because when I was working at Bouverie, I started to do genograms for the Women in Prison Project and for our intake for 'Workin' with the Mob'. And I said, oh, let me try and do mine. I'd never done one before and I downloaded GenoPro onto my computer, because that's what everyone in our sector uses. I was able to do it quite quickly, because fortunately I've got connections to my family. It didn't take a lot of research for me, I just had to ask a couple of family members a couple of questions, and I was able to place people, right up to my great-great-grandparents. So I feel fortunate in that way, that I know who I am. I know where I come from. My family haven't lost that bit of history or that bit of knowledge.

The conventional genogram was confronting because the symbols that are used to illustrate patterns or connections or disconnections in our family were just very harsh. When I sat back after I'd finished my conventional genogram, it was just full of red lines and crosses, and Xs, and just things that were really sad to look at.

And whilst I know that that is my family history and my family story, I didn't feel like it represented who I was and my connection to my family, and my experience in growing up with my family. It didn't celebrate the love; it didn't celebrate the strength; it didn't celebrate the resilience; it only ... what I felt was it was just ... a devastating story, is what it showed.

It was true but it wasn't the whole story. And so, I looked at it and said, that's not me. That doesn't represent who I am, or who my family are. And so I went about doing my own genogram. I wanted to test myself with my artistic capabilities, so I took to canvas with acrylic paint. And this was during COVID. And I feel like I needed that time to spread out my kitchen table.

I did all my artwork that way, and it sat there for a couple of weeks but it's the process that I needed to take when I sat with what I was doing and every family member was there with me in that room. I've got circles that represent each family member, even those that I don't have a connection with.

I had to sit with that loss. I had to sit with that disconnection. I had to acknowledge the grief that comes with not knowing that side of the family. You know, my grandfather, my dad's dad, is German. And I know that we've got a big family over in Germany. It's not spoken about; it's never acknowledged in our family.

But I had to actually draw that loss and disconnection, draw that hidden part of the story. Even though I don't know him, my great grandfather, he was there with me in the room. Whoever he is. I had to sit with people who had passed, sit with people who have hurt me, sit with people who I have formed good connections with, with people who have helped me. And it was healing.

You know, even those that I didn't have a strong connection with anymore, like my father. I still drew, you know, patterns of love, patterns of connection, teachings, wisdom that he's handed down to me. And he's represented there on the genogram, so it was really nice doing it. I need to add my second child. She's not at it ... But, you know, I'd love to see my kids continue that on with another canvas and adding to it. But that's my dream, that doesn't have to be their dream.

And then by the end of that, I felt fuller. When I looked at that image, I felt like it represented me, represented my family, in all the ugliness, the prettiness, the beauty, the pain, it was all there. In a way that I felt honoured me, but also them.

2.3.2 | Sharing With Others

Every time I talk about the journey for me to create the genogram as a student or a teacher, I see Aboriginal students, or any student that comes from an oppressive family history, resonating with my story. And it's still emotional every time. This year I still had a bit of an emotional hiccup, but I was stronger in how I spoke to it, but I remember the vulnerability the first year I shared it. And it was vulnerable because I was speaking things that had never been spoken before. I was articulating things that were never able to be articulated before. And I was telling strangers my family's story. Which also, I know, and some students have said this, that they fear that there's a dishonouring. That happens to their family, that there's, like, a break in confidentiality. And when you look at contextual family therapy, they can understand it through that lens. But it was very healing, and one of the phrases that came up a lot this year with our student cohort was the sitting in the fire (Atkinson 2002). That analogy was used so much, particularly from one student who really had to sit in the fire of her family's history and family story, and that's what it was like for me. But it was healing. I came out of it with a greater sense of empathy for my family. It helped me make sense of my family's story a bit more. The experiences are still there, the pain's still there, but the empathy has now increased. I understand why they are the way they are, I understand why there are fragments, or why there might be different breakdowns in different relationships, and I accept that. But saying it helped. Speaking it, giving words to it, articulating it helps to make sense of it.

I think shame's also a big part of it, where Aboriginal people experience shame for, especially for a lot of, you know, groups who have experienced colonisation or oppression. Shame has almost become part of our identity, and there's a lot to be shameful for. Whether it's, you know, in whatever parts of society we have to pretend to

be different because it's shameful to be too Aboriginal. So I think sharing your family's struggles, sharing your family's pain, sharing the imperfections of your family, there's an element of shame that comes with it. And because we know that... that shame in our family, I know that my grandfather carried a lot of shame. And so sharing his story felt like I was harming him. I was adding to that shame, and I can understand students that say the same thing. Is that they don't want to do anything. It comes from love and wanting to protect their family from experiencing any more pain and shame. When people are ... when First Nations people are able to do their genogram in their own music, in their own language, in their own pictures that ... It hands back the shame to where it belongs. That's what it felt like for me when I came to realise it is not my family's fault. They were not broken to begin with. Hey, we're '... forced to become this, but it's not who they are, inherently.

When students go through that process, they all feel a great level of vulnerability, fear, anger and frustration, all in the middle of the course when they are going through this process of sitting in the fire and looking and all this stuff in the face. But then at the end, they all come out lighter. They all come out, like Aunty Judy Atkinson (2002) says, with this more integrated spiritual sense of who they are. A stronger sense of self. But it's that fragile part in the middle. What I love about the cultural way of doing genograms is that there is ownership. Whatever the student needs to make sense of, whatever they need to focus on, whatever, however, they want to tell their story, can be told in their way. And it can be retold in different ways moving forward, it does not have to stay that stagnant moment in history. It can be retold differently every time they revisit the genogram. A conventional genogram does not allow that level of choice.

2.3.3 | Cross-Cultural Sharing

Robyne Latham and Kerry Proctor recently collaborated in depicting Kerry's family. Robyne is a First Nations Yamatji woman from Western Australia, living and working in Boon Wurrung Country in Victoria. She is an artist and was a researcher/trainer in family therapy. Dr Kerry Proctor is an Anglo-Celtic woman with Italian heritage. She lives and works on Dja Dja Wurung Country in Victoria. She is a family therapist, supervisor and was a lecturer in family therapy, La Trobe University.

Figure 6 is a depiction of Kerry's family genogram.

When looking into the painting of five generations of Kerry's family, the depth and layers of her family's history and the interconnectedness of those generations is represented in a holistic way. Robyne's methodology is borne from the coalescence of her knowledge of fine art and family therapy. Her approach is significantly different from the Darwinian construct of a genogram, which employs linear time and often precludes family cultures, thematic patterns and interconnections.

To achieve this, Robyne transposed her conversation with Kerry into a five-generational genogram in which Kerry identified the colours she specifically associated with each family member. The symbols, content and composition of the painting were informed by Robyne's interpretation of the themes that surfaced during their conversation. This included the family's culture(s),



FIGURE 6 | 'A Whirlpool of Generational Stories'.

pivotal transgenerational connections and patterns that loop back and forth across time. As Robyne explains:

The challenging decisions in this type of work are what you leave out yet still incorporate. Even more challenging is what you decide to omit altogether. I look for the patterns that connect, rather than the lines that connect. For example, unlike the inclusion of Kerry's children and grandchildren, her parents are not specifically depicted in this work. However, the rhythm of their influence is present and indeed underpins the whole painting. The family paintings and sculptures I have created work with non-linear time. I depict all influences/conditioning as ever present. As I see it, our choice is to raise our awareness and understanding of how we manage our generational and cultural legacies.

Kerry's experience of her genogram being painted by a First Nations artist highlights the gift of First Nations wisdoms in being able to think of our families in creative non-linear ways. In Kerry's words:

As a non-Indigenous family therapist, the impact of seeing my family history and patterns depicted in this way was profound. It shifted my focus from the individuals and influential people in my past, to the patterns and connections that have endured. Highlighted for me is the importance of the process of describing the family story over generations, the translation of that telling by the artist/therapist and focusing on the meaning of that exploration in the relationship.

As a family therapist, supervisor and teacher, I would like to encourage emerging family therapists, as well as experienced clinicians to co-create a visual collage of their own family. They may then be able to assist their clients to process their family history(s) focusing on the experience when having it represented visually. It becomes a powerful therapeutic tool when sharing the meaning of the visual genogram with the families they are working with.

2.3.4 | Final Reflections

Our learning from the experience and wisdom of First Nations students has influenced our practice of teaching and using genograms with all families at The Bouverie Centre.

Learning to think systemically through the use of standard genograms highlighted the stark absence of many stories for First Nations' students. As highlighted by Alison (reflecting on the work of Aunty Judy Atkinson), Karen, Clarisse, Robyne, and over 200 graduates of the First Nations family therapy course, conventional genograms fail to tell the whole story. In the end, First Nations students were able to learn about Western genograms and become fluent in the medium, whilst teaching non-First Nations family therapists how to create culturally meaningful and congruent genograms that privilege and tell a richer family story.

As Shaun Coade, cultural consultant to Banu, reminds us, 'You get it right for my people and you will get it right by all people' (Moloney 2014). The First Nations Cultural genogram gives autonomy to students and families—autonomy to tell their story in a way that makes sense to *them*. As therapists, our role is to support family sovereignty—to facilitate the claiming and re-claiming of the *families'* narratives; to be wary of any story created by the therapist, the welfare worker or the (Government) Department.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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