social sciences

MDPI

Article

Connecting Us Back to Ourselves: Aesthetic Experience as a Means to Growth after Trauma

Jill Bennett [1,2], Gail Kenning [1,2,*], Marianne Wobcke [1] and Lydia Gitau [1,2]

[1] Big Anxiety Research Centre (BARC), University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia; j.bennett@unsw.edu.au (J.B.); m.wobcke@unsw.edu.au (M.W.); l.gitau@unsw.edu.au (L.G.)
[2] fEEL-felt Experience & Empathy Lab., School of Art & Design, University of New South Wales, Kensington, NSW 2052, Australia
* Correspondence: gail.kenning@unsw.edu.au

Abstract: This article examines the experience and effects of a trauma-responsive program that uses creative methods to address the ongoing psychosocial impacts of transgenerational trauma and youth suicide, which disproportionately affect First Nations people in Australia. Our aim is to understand how the aesthetic (sensory-affective) dimensions of such a program serve to promote experiences of growth after trauma, manifesting in a sense of connection to both self and community. The paper focuses on the second of two immersive, experiential workshops delivered seven months apart in the regional town of Warwick in Queensland, Australia. In the light of self-reports of growth and personal transformation following the initial workshop, the paper examines the key drivers of such growth, focusing in particular on how trauma-related experience is metabolised through cultural containment. It builds on Bion's concept of container/contained, combining analysis of the affordances of immersion. Framed in cultural rather than medical terms, the larger goal of the paper is to establish how cultural programs fill a gap in trauma informed support, facilitating the processing of trauma.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge; immersion; trauma; aesthetic engagement; relational psychoanalysis; Bion; Winnicott; psychosocial

Citation: Bennett, Jill, Gail Kenning, Marianne Wobcke, and Lydia Gitau. 2024. Connecting Us Back to Ourselves: Aesthetic Experience as a Means to Growth after Trauma. *Social Sciences* 13: 20. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010020

Academic Editor: Nigel Parton

Received: 2 October 2023
Revised: 8 December 2023
Accepted: 13 December 2023
Published: 26 December 2023

1. Introduction

> *It's just connecting us back to ourselves really, which then connects us to Country (workshop participant)*

If the body's response to trauma is to limit or control psychic damage, "desensitizing the self to further toxic events" and preserving a constant state by "ridding the subject of excitation" (Bollas 1992, p. 71) how then do we enable the traumatised self to grow, to be sensitised to new experience, to connect in a generative way with both the inner and outer world? This question goes to the core of how and where we locate the work of transforming trauma. The process of connecting to self, to community—and to Country, in the Indigenous Australian sense—is a profoundly cultural one. The process of sensitising, of sensing and feeling connection is an aesthetic one, in the true sense of the term 'aesthetic', which pertains to sensory-affective perception (Bennett and Froggett 2019). Hence, reparative work may be both cultural and aesthetic. But how does a cultural/aesthetic approach to trauma work? What are the operative elements for transforming trauma within a cultural/aesthetic program?

In health or medical research it is common to look for 'mechanisms' of change. The novelist and theorist of psychiatry, Siri Hustvedt is critical of this construct both in relation to mental health (where the mechanistic model is inadequate to the description of the complex interacting determinants) and creative practice (Hustvedt and Bennett 2022). Although a burgeoning number of studies and trials evince the copious health outcomes of

the arts, those that focus on quantifying outputs from mechanistic causes tell us little about the aesthetic process in relation to felt experience. They infer the presence of 'mechanisms' from outputs but they do not study the process by which people perceive and experience change—a process in which difficult feelings and emotions ebb and flow in ways that are not easy to capture in language. A reductionist medical model is, in other words, inadequate to explicating a cultural approach to trauma—particularly as the latter moves beyond a deficit model of health/illness.

In this paper, we are interested in how an aesthetic program is experienced—and how and why its form, content and dynamic flow facilitates a transformation of trauma or a perceived shift in self-experiencing. The program we focus on is the second of two trauma-responsive, experiential workshops delivered by our team (The Big Anxiety festival) in November 2022 in the regional town of Warwick in Queensland, Australia, utilising creative methods to address the ongoing psychosocial impacts of transgenerational trauma and youth suicide in a predominantly Aboriginal community[1]. Around 40 people attended the workshop. Of these, 22 were from the Warwick community, 18 were invited as practitioners (themselves survivors of trauma or with related lived experience) involved in delivery of some part of the program.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Trauma to Growth

The project is framed as a cultural rather than medical or pathologising response to trauma; in other words, trauma is understood as the effect of 'what happens to us, not what's wrong with us' (Article One and The Big Anxiety 2023). This is particularly important in the context of negative experiences of the health system reported by participants (Bennett et al. 2023) but also more widely by First Nations Australians (Prevention and Response to Violence Abuse and Neglect Government Relations (PARVAN 2023)). As one participant commented:

> *The question that everyone asks is 'What's wrong with you?'. . .So that just really hit my heart. Yes! It's about what happened to you, because that's where your story is. . . .We all have a story to tell, even if we don't think we have. And to actually have someone hear your story and validate your story is so important.*

In open-ended interviews, following the initial workshop in Warwick in April 2022, participants reported experiences of self-transformation or "growth" that in some cases were dramatic ("maybe ten years of growth in a short span of time"), manifesting as feelings of connection to both self and community (Bennett et al. 2023). They spoke of grief and pain being "suppressed" and finding an outlet through the workshops. One participant who has since described herself as "shut down" after trauma and "pretending to participate in life" describes the wider challenge:

> *There are other women out there who don't understand what they're doing to themselves because they think of it in terms of being numb, of not feeling, of getting through the day. . .but they're not actually able to connect to being fully who they are. And it's because trauma has changed who they are. I feel like every person, every woman I have met recently has had such a horrific path.*

In this light, we are interested in techniques for enabling feeling—for 'connecting to being fully who [we] are'—and understanding the perceived trajectory from trauma to growth. A principal source for this is the work of D.W. Winnicott, Wilfred Bion and others in the relational or 'ontological' tradition of psychoanalysis, so named for its emphasis on the relational nature of being and the belief that insight arises from/within a relationship rather than from an expert's interpretation. In this tradition, Thomas Ogden suggests, the realm of "psychopathology" may be understood in experiential (subjective/intersubjective) rather than diagnostic (objective) terms as "the experience of not growing, not changing, not becoming" (Ogden 2019, p. 7). The opposite of this (and the goal of therapies or support programs) is "becoming more the person one is and might become"—a formulation which resonates with the language used by participants. "Becoming" in adulthood is largely

an "internal matter", involving things like "being present to one's feelings" or "actively developing one's own creative potential" (Ogden 2022, p. 6). Creativity here can be understood both as the realisation of agency and potential and as the bottom-up exercise of creative apperception (Bennett et al. 2023): the ability to intentionally shape one's environment and the capacity to be sensitised to it. However, Winnicott's writing on growth specifically references how we make use of external objects or aesthetic resources, along with other relational experiences, taking these into ourselves. As Ogden (2019, p. 666) paraphrases,

> *. . .we take something that is not yet part of us (for example, an experience with a spouse or a friend or in reading a poem or listening to a piece of music) and weave it into who we are in a way that makes us more than who we were before we had that experience, before weaving the experience into our personal pattern. Winnicott, here, in developing the ontological aspect of psychoanalysis, is inventing language as he goes—"to weave other-than-me objects into the personal pattern"—a way of speaking about psychic growth that I have never come across anywhere else.*

This process-oriented language—self-evidently at odds with mechanistic reduction—alerts us to the fact that it is not simply the poem or the piece of music (as mechanism) that is transformative but the capacity for "weaving into" the self—and the self-experiencing that flows from this. In this regard, our art-based programs comprise both purposefully designed aesthetic resources (in particular, audio-visual, immersive experiences in our case) and psychosocial design, which ensures the optimal conditions for transformation. The latter, we have previously suggested, encompasses the in-event facilitation as well as a psychosocial design/planning process that attends to the affordances in and around the event: the material and intangible features of a space that promote options for action or opportunities for experiencing (Bennett et al. 2022, 2023).

1.2. Research Question

Our goal is to understand how experience itself is enabled or facilitated, in this case through an immersive workshop, comprising design, facilitation and aesthetic elements. For us, the key question is not *whether* the workshop transforms trauma or promotes beneficial change but *how* it does so. From the participants' perspective: how is the experience taken in, understood and held onto, thereby contributing to internal transformation? This is a critical question in a context where participants described themselves as "numb" or "shut down" to new experience, and where the goal of a workshop is for participants to *make use* of creative resources rather than simply to enjoy an arts-based activity for its own sake. A key part of our facilitation of such events therefore focuses on the propensity for participation and being in an event or experience, ensuring that as (negative) feelings come up, these can be held and processed or detoxified.

In this sense, the event and its facilitation play a containing role, which can be understood in terms of Bion's "container/contained" model in which a mother (in early childhood) or an analyst (in a therapeutic relationship) plays a containing role in respect of pain/anxiety (Bion [1970] 1993). Containing here implies the capacity to bear—rather than avoid/deflect—the pain and anxiety expressed by the other, and to remain receptive/giving, ultimately enabling a digested and detoxified form of those feelings to be conveyed. In childhood, the infant ideally takes in and receives the containment the mother is offering, which "leads to increasing mental space, the development of a capacity to make meaning" (Mitrani 2015, p. 69) but when/where a mother/other is not able to play this containing role, whereby a "good object" is internalised, the absence results in introjection of a "bad object, fit only for evacuation, not fit for thoughts" (Zeavin 2011). This leaves the infant with internalised badness, shame or self-hate, unable to take in and metabolise painful feelings which are instead apt to be projected externally. The absence of containment, along with susceptibility to "nameless dread" may persist through life but as (Alford 2018, p. 48) observes, trauma whenever it comes "can shatter even a securely built container (that is, self)", compromising the capacity to make links/meaning/connections. Thus, the

establishment of a safe container or holding space is a first priority of trauma informed practice—and a precondition for reintegrating and making sense of the shattered fragments of experience that trauma produces.

At stake here is the potential to create secure containment such that feelings associated with trauma can be felt and metabolised, not simply through good facilitation (which is paramount) but within a group setting, making use of aesthetic resources.

2. Approach/Method

Our approach is practice-based (insofar as we address the research question empirically through the design and delivery of workshops and tools) and formative or iterative in the sense that we evolve practice in response to participant needs and preferences, in this case, building on an earlier workshop in Warwick and its reception by the community. The approach is bottom-up in its focus on embodied lived experience and on how experience changes—but also in its experiential methods of engagement. It is trauma responsive in the sense of recognising trauma responses and adapting to and anticipating the needs of people who have experienced trauma.

Data was gathered from participants in and after events by open-ended interview (i.e., audio/video interviews that allowed participants to report on feelings and experiences without following structured questions), and via a survey with open ended written responses to the questions 'how did the event impact on you?', 'what surprised you about the event' and 'how did the event make you feel?'. In addition, a number of participants elected to be part of a film-documentation project, collaborating on the film *Changing Our Ways* (Article One and The Big Anxiety 2023), which contains extensive personal reflections on the process at multiple timepoints. The research team members both conducted audio/video interviews and were participant observers within the relational framework outlined; that is, they all participated in workshop sessions, committing to self-reflective engagement while also remaining attentive to process and flow. Discussion/debrief is central to our analysis of experiential process, which is then supported and refined by analysis of participant interview data. The analysis focused on in-event process and the felt experiences reported, and on post-event experience, identifying perceived changes.

2.1. The Workshop Design

Our initial two-day workshop in April 2022 commenced with an immersive audio-visual experience called *Road Trip* by Marianne Wobcke, during which (following an introduction) people could either sit, lay on the floor on mats, or move as they pleased. Conceived within the artist's framework of Perinatal Dreaming and Understanding Country, and informed by her practice as an Indigenous midwife (Bennett et al. 2023), the Road Trip evokes a perinatal journey from conception, through gestation and birth to the process of 'connecting to Country', through a playlist of music and accompanying video imagery projected on a large screen.[2] In the second two-day workshop (November 2022), we extended and consolidated this component with two Road Trips—one each day, designed and hosted by Wobcke with support from other First Nations artists and our wider creative team. This expansion was in large part due to the community's positive response to this element in/after the first workshop (Bennett et al. 2023).

Sessions in the workshop were not rigidly delineated or timetabled but responsive to the group process and flow; facilitators were also participants. For example, dancers/musicians who participated in the Road Trip (Githabul, Migunberri-Yugumbeh woman Alinta McGrady and South Sea & Yuwi Burra descendant Waveney Yasso) offered a relaxed session of movement, singing and journaling, which extended the process of yarning circles. Other activities were available continuously within the space over the two days, so that people could make use of—rather than simply passively consume—aesthetic resources. These included participation in a large collaborative painting offered by Mandandanji visual artist, Aaron Dhuril Blades; bodywork by Wiradjuri woman Jess Simpson, (Kinesiologist) and Heather Graham (Bowen therapy); and an interactive installation of

tactile objects by Ben McKinnon (mental health nurse, participating in non-clinical role). Our team provided our own purpose-made virtual reality [VR] resources, including the EmbodiMap tool which enables users to generate a mapping of internal space and felt experience. Participants were also able to experience the first iteration of a new VR counterpart to the Road Trip, Perinatal Dreaming—a fully immersive experience evoking early life in the womb and entry into the world, taking us through experiences the 'good' and 'toxic' womb and first encounters with breast, skin and the world/Country. For participants,

> *The diversity of creative activities enabled so many different entry points for people. . . there's so many things around. . .we can just kind of do what you feel like you need.*

2.2. Understanding Country: Indigenous Ways of Knowing

The intent of the Road Trip is to provide an opportunity to explore experiences associated with perinatal trauma (which may stem from early life/attachment relationships, neglect or abuse; intergenerational trauma; or specific birth/birthing related experiences). Lacking containment, such trauma often remains unprocessed: repressed, dissociated or "buried alive" so that we lose our sense of aliveness (Ogden 2022, p. 5). In this light, Wobcke describes the Road Trip as a chance to experience feelings associated with trauma as 'elevated emotion' (Article One and The Big Anxiety 2023) within a safe container, supported by immersive sound and visuals, which promote excitation (rather than deadness) but also a movement through emotion states, always ending with a grounding or coming back to Country.

Crucially, the Road Trip acknowledges the context of collective, intergenerational trauma and the Indigenous ways of knowing that have been marginalised in Western/colonial practice (Atkinson 2002). It builds skills of attunement and the capacity to bear/hold feelings, which resonate with Western psychotherapeutic practice but are also grounded in the Indigenous principles of Dadirri—deep listening, 'self-reflection, mindfulness and patient waiting' (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al. 2022; Ungunmerr 1988)—and Kanyini, 'our connectedness to our *tjukurrpa* (law and values), our *ngura* (place), our *walytja* (family and community) and our *kurunpa* (spirit or soul)' (Randall 2013). Implied in 'Understanding Country' is an Indigenous notion of wellbeing that arises from this sense of interconnectedness and restoring ruptured connection. As one of our participants noted of the workshop: *connecting us back to ourselves. . .connects us to Country.*

As one of thousands of Indigenous children forcibly removed from her mother at birth, Wobcke embodies the experience of ruptured connection and collective/personal trauma that results from colonial violence. Blades also spoke in the workshop of reconnecting to Country as a way out of the violence and trauma of the justice and health systems. Country, then, provides a powerful topographic image—but one that is indivisible from culture and community (Evolve Communities n.d.a):

> *Country doesn't just refer to the physical land Aboriginal communities lie on, but the collection of animals, plants, and people that live there. These connections include seasons, creation spirits, and heritage; Country is a belief system and a home for First Nations people.*

When we evoke holding or containment in this context, it is important to recognise the palpable and intangible role of Country and the ceremony that is its expression. For Wobcke, the Road Trip is in part inspired by ceremony, which, for Craig San Roque is the vehicle for connecting interior and exterior life through symbolic imagery: "symbols are painted on bodies and arranged in ceremonies. . .so that Tjukurrpa stories become real in the mind" (San Roque 2006, p. 155). Ceremony, he suggests, might be "the communal container wherein subtle psychological transformations take place, the place where thoughts are assembled, somehow inside and outside the human mind at the same time" (San Roque 2006, p. 163).

This sheds light on the enlivening role of imagery and material symbolism within a "communal container" more generally. In Western thinking, health and art are paradigmatically divided. Hence, art *in health* is largely understood as an introduced element, evaluated

by the reductive metrics of the health/medical paradigm. By contrast, Aboriginal culture provides a rich model of integration in which interior thought or ideas emerge from things imaged or symbolised:

> *In the Tjukurrpa 'state of mind', if you want to move ideas, you have to paint bodies and move objects as actual things and as psychically charged representations of things/places/beings/rocks. . .The ceremonial enactments present..things as..moving thoughts. They move, through the container of the ceremony, from a location in the country into a place in someone's mind and thus into everyone's mind. As a result, land forms and mind are fused consciously.* (San Roque 2006, pp. 163–64)

3. Discussion of Process and Outcomes

In practical terms, our research focused on how a container could be realized and meaningfully experienced in a two-day event, and how its aesthetic mediation through immersive media supported the process. Our participant data shows how containment was experienced, and 'made use of'—and how impacts were felt and sustained.

3.1. Containing Space

The container in our context was realised at a number of levels as a material locus and/or psychosocial experience. The event was variously described by participants as somewhere to expeirence feelings and/or to place grief and loss, which is otherwise habitually suppressed. The workshop as a whole—and the treatment of the venue—was curated as an integrated immersive space, so that containment was experienced as ambient or "all around" rather than purely through the facilitator's active holding:

> *. . .in that room it's such a safe space to be and just let your guard down. . .and I love that it was all around.*
>
> *//I knew that I was safe. I still, once I got there, had to just sit by myself for a bit, but then just noticing how quickly it turned into a safe zone and how quickly the nerves melt away. And you just revelled in what everybody has to say.*

The Road Trip session embodies a specific topography, symbolising containment or holding with its evocation of early life environments through a soundtrack accompanied by an evocative immersive video. In the film, *Changing Our Ways*, Wobcke explains how the immersive properties are designed to tip people out of a beta state of arousal into a relaxed alpha state, conducive to reverie (Bion [1962] 2007). The Road Trip is thus perceived imagistically—albeit felt and intuited, rather than processed symbolically. As Robert Caper puts it: "significance is felt in the body rather than decoded by the intellect. . .[the] effect, like that of music, is immediate, emotional and non-verbal" (Caper 2020, p. 11). In this respect the spatial symbolism was a catalyst for comfort and safety:

> *. . .it just made me feel really, really comfortable, you know, comfortable in myself and my surroundings. I felt more comfortable in the group after going through that.*

Topography is more directly represented in the VR Perinatal Dreaming experience, which immerses users in recognizable perinatal environments, including a 3D virtual interior womb-space[3]. Participants testing the VR journey again described this as "encompassing" and "safe", the music propelling you forward. More evocatively, it was associated with "love", the sensory experience of the space identified as "feel[ing] like the inside of a heart". This physical sensing of space as a metaphorically opened heart is echoed in descriptions of the self "opening up". For this participant, for example, the Road Trip offered both a locus for missing/the missing and a space in which mind, senses and feelings could open up:

> *Well, it blew me away, to be honest. That time that we spent on the floor [during the Road Trip] and listened to music and her [Wobcke] talking. . .you just sort of went into a different place. It was like you were outside of your body, but then you weren't. I just felt different. Like suddenly I opened up in my mind or my senses and my feelings. And I*

> *think I got a little upset because it opened everything out. And not the pain part of it. The missing part. The missing.*
>
> *I've accepted the death of my three sons and I'm pretty grateful for what this experience gave me today. It really opened up everything.*

The audio-visual component of the Road Trip was supported with a series of yarning circles allowing for reflection and processing (yarning being an Indigenous conversational practice and methodology (Evolve Communities n.d.b)). In this setting Wobcke promoted self-reflective practice (taking responsibility, awareness of projection) from the position of an Indigenous woman of Stolen Generations background who has worked through and continues to work through her own trauma. Her approach was described by participants as "safe", "down to earth" and as promoting connection:

> *. . .she gave us that opportunity to connect between each other and understand how we were all on the same journey. It was that that ability to connect the sameness regardless of background, creed, race.//*
>
> *. . .the empathy that flows from her creates this environment. her spoken word confirms what her body language [expresses]—her very essence that you sense when you are around her is what connects it. I try to emulate that. . .I tried to be very gentle with every single human being I interact with*

Participants specifically noted the importance of the group discussion in relation to the 'transformative' process:

> *I actually think the [yarning] circles were where the magic happened. As transformative as those road trips are, it was having people sitting and talking around their experiences . . .processing whatever happened or didn't happen together.*

This comment locating the work of processing in the group session points to the responsive function implied in containment, which may not be fully embodied in a cultural object or experience:

> *In a narrow technical sense, [ambient containing by non-human agents] is probably not containment, because the container is not capable of receiving, responding to and modifying the subject's projections. . .there is no reception and detoxification as specified in Bion's concept of containment.* (Figlio and Richards 2003, p. 412)

Here Figlio and Richards are discussing the kind of ambient containment provided by streetlighting—an everyday provision that may only be perceived as containing through particular attunement (for example, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso talks about coming to the UK for the first time and perceiving with gratitude the generous intent embodied in public street lighting—a genuinely relational sensitivity to which most people habituated to walking under streetlights are usually not attuned (Salter 2019)).

The ambient experience of the trauma-responsive immersive workshop, where containment is in part achieved by what Deborah Wright refers to as the room-object or spatial matrix (Wright 2022) is however, intentionally designed to be experienced as a container. Wright envisages the consulting room of a psychotherapist as a primary container, suggesting that patients are apt to make use of spatialisation in a therapeutic set-up, even when the environment is incidental/extraneous to the therapeutic relationship. Within our workshops, this spatial container is purposefully designed to promote aesthetic experience as the central vehicle of engagement, supported by but not subordinate to verbal elements of facilitation (introduction, reflective discussion and debrief).

3.2. Immersion

Immersion is an aesthetic affordance that makes the event fully experiential: a shared experiencing as opposed to simply talking about lived experience. In a well-designed workshop, the immersive flow is unbroken, though facilitators would support and work with occasional moments of disruption, acknowledging them "at times explicitly, when they take the form of enactment or collision" (Benjamin 2018, p. 171) as might occur

within relational psychoanalysis which emphasises "being with" and being together in "the rhythmic flow of empathic immersion" without interruption (Benjamin 2018, p. 171).

Immersion promotes a particular kind of relationship to knowing and thinking; it gives rise to thinking "within the flow" rather than about the flow—akin to the mode of reverie (Bion [1962] 2007). Reverie (waking dreaming) in Bion's sense is a state of being that entails making oneself unconsciously receptive to experiencing what is disturbing (Ogden 2022, p. 18)—in this case in a workshop that allows for detoxification. For participants, reverie was promoted by both visual and audio stimuli:

> *I found the images really stimulating, so my mind switched on pretty instantly. And I had this creative flow going on. . .idea after idea after and it just would not stop. And that was fantastic.*

Immersive sound or visual effects free us in the moment from the need to interpret. Noreen Giffney writes of music that it "assists participants to become unstuck from the words, the narrative, the manifest content and allow their minds to wander; to exercise "evenly suspended attention"' (Giffney 2021, p. 86). Music also propels flow and movement through an experience, as participants found:

> *Definitely the music, [I] always connected to the music and then the connection between the movement through each part of the process.*

In describing the value of ideas that come from an analytic process, Bollas writes that an idea is only transformed into insight when it undergoes a "topographic return" to a "preconscious holding area (an inner mental space) where it evokes instinctual representations, unconscious affects, unconscious memories, and then returns to consciousness after such inner work has occurred" (Bollas 2019, p. 71). Bollas is here evoking a topography of the mind (unconscious, preconscious, conscious) but in the "Tjukurrpa state of mind", where ideas 'move' and come to people through the experience of psychically charged space and symbolism (San Roque 2006, p. 163), a similar connection is made to an internally meaningful truth. And in the Road Trip, as Wobcke says, the music is not what makes people feel; music orients and locates people in a process that gives rise to memory and association, in turn enabling deep links to be made. In other words, it is the experience of *feeling* an internal connection that is the crux of this process. When this occurs in therapy, Bollas says, "what was only a theory now bears the patient's instinctual, affective and memorial print". Through such a process the psyche "actually 'grows' more capable of processing life" (Bollas 2019, p. 72).

3.3. Making Use/Metabolising

If an immersive workshop utilises aesthetic media to support the sense of feeling safe/held and, by extension, the capacity to hold, feel and know emotion, this experience may be seen to support a productive processing of feelings, "metabolising raw affect. . .into more articulated emotions" (Benjamin 2018, p. 175). This has the potential to transform a being "done to" experience into something over which the participant has a measure of control. In other words, in addition to feeling safe/held, a participant may come to embody and enact the function of containment that is modelled through the event.

One participant (participant C) presents a rich account of her process in an extraordinary piece of journaling, describing how containment (here embodying the symbolism of the womb) gave rise to feelings of both love and horror:

> *After day one. Here is what I felt. Bliss. Floating in darkness and then a warmth, filled with pure love to my left. The presence of my Father as though feeling him through the wall of the womb.*
>
> *Just a quiet, pulsing presence, and then, another presence on top and in front of me. . . rank and hate filled. . .I felt pinned down and a heavy weight that was crushing me filling me. In my head, I was screaming. But I couldn't, so I dug my nails into my palms to feel the pain and hold my resolve waiting for it to stop.*

> *I turned onto my stomach to calm, to protect, to be still and not see anymore. I realised lying on my stomach was my position to hold and comfort myself after.*
>
> *That is what broke me yesterday. Last night I sat in this knowledge and questioned if what I felt was what I felt because it was so powerful?*
>
> *I'm back today. I cancelled my shift. I know I cannot stay in this space. See you at nine*

Participant C had initially enrolled for the first day only but, after embodied memories of abuse began to surface, knew she needed to return rather than escape. Having attended the previous workshops, she was inclined to "trust the process" and her own capacity to make use of it, knowing that this would enable her to process her pain:

> *The second Road Trip unravelled the emotion inside. I knew it would remove my emotional pain and invigorate me (like plug me in and get my battery charged). I knew to trust the process and let my conscious brain switch off and allow the dreamer, the singer, the best version of myself to bathe in the ocean of the music and when done, to emerge and shake the negative off me. The happiness that I felt exploded in my head and my chest and I could not wipe the smile from my face. I literally was smiling from ear to ear. So much power in the Road Trip. Trust the process.*

Trust requires the presence of a safe container within which resources/objects may be accessed. But the skill to make use of such resources was by this point internalised by participant C, who having undertaken previous Road Trips understood her relationship to the process to yield positive and negative feelings. A practiced user of the Road Trip, she was able to engage in reverie (letting "conscious brain switch off"), to allow negative affect to arise, to be "shaken off" and replaced by "happiness". Such happiness was not simply an effect of the external stimulus (e.g., music) but of internal knowing which allows the "best version of myself" to manifest. The aesthetic process in this regard attunes to "the deeper levels of unconscious internal world, located on the border between bodily sensation and mental experience [which] are the source of emotionality", and which are communicated in a process akin to "song-and-dance. . .felt in the body" rather than perceived by the intellect (Caper 2020, p. 11).

3.4. Containment vs. Retreat

When participant C immerses herself and "bathes in the music" she understands herself to engage in a process that yields something more than momentary bliss or escape: happiness is an effect of coming through and "shaking off" rather than avoiding feeling.

Giffney distinguishes such a process from the use of cultural objects as a "psychic retreat" or hiding place, providing protection from anxiety and pain (Giffney 2021, pp. 114–27). The manic consumption of music, films or other (interchangeable) objects can offer a sense of psychic safety from experiences which are overwhelming. A painful experience that is being protected against is effectively filtered through an experience with a cultural object "which keeps the original at a distance while at the same time enabling some of the affect to be felt" (Giffney 2021, p. 115).

The functioning of a psychic retreat and a container differs in the way in which the object is employed. In the case of a psychic retreat, contact must be "continuously maintained in order to cultivate protective properties" (e.g., we blast music non-stop, we binge watch Netflix etc); in the case of a container, the object itself becomes significant: "The experience engendered as a result of making contact with the object takes on an importance in the [person's] psychic life" and "The affect is often compelling and present" from first contact (Giffney 2021, p. 124). Most crucially, the object (the Road Trip in this case) does not obliterate and/or shield us from anxiety/pain but "holds and metabolises the too-muchness of experience, which can then be re-introjected in a more manageable and meaningful way". This is what participant C experienced. She learned in effect to 'walk into' her experience, to surrender in the positive sense that Benjamin (2018, p. 140) describes as moving beyond the dynamic of active/passive, doer/done to.

> *I'd been so fearful of what that trauma looked like. I could feel it and I had to walk into it. This is what this whole process has done for me.*

This is a critical distinction since passive consumption of a cultural object—however distractive or soothing in the moment—does not enable release from the power structure in which one is 'done to' or rendered powerless. The offering of an immersive experience as a "psychic retreat" (ie. as a blissful escape without the modelling of a container) would likely not persist in its effect after the event. Moreover, a participant who is 'triggered' without embodying containment might lack the internal resources to process the experience. At stake, then, is how containment is taken on, underderstood and sustained by participants.

3.5. Release/Intensity

While not every participant documented the detailed process elaborated by C, above, the "intensity" and "release" of emotion was commonly reported in response to the survey question 'what did you find most surprising?':

> *The intensity of my feelings//The level of emotion that came out, the different activities available and all the nurturing //The release of emotions//*

> *It made me physically sick, lost my voice. Released more than I could have imagined. //Profound. Loved it all*

Responses to the question 'how did the event make you feel?' similarly pointed to significant, beneficial shifts:

> *I feel a transformation in myself—very healing//*

> *Yesterday I had no idea what I was feeling. Today I had a huge meltdown, a huge cry. I really enjoyed that double Road Trip.//*

> *Today has given me ideas about what I can be in the community and who I am in the world.//Profound change.//*

> *My feet have been numb for 10 years. And they're not numb today.//*

> *I feel quite relaxed. Moving forward I think I'm going to be a much better person for it.*

Being "sick" or in "meltdown" was reported not as a negative outcome but as a necessary release of toxicity, productively managed.

> *I knew it had done what I needed it to do, which was to just release bruises, release the trauma, release the pain, release the grief.*

This data suggests that participants were relatively confident in their use of the event and in their own capacity to experience and manage feelings in this setting—with the expectation that effects may persist. The workshop also provided a framework for understanding experience that had no outlet or visibility:

> *I just feel like the workshop gives people. . .takes them through a healing process they don't even know that they're going through or need. The workshops take you through this deep transformative process. . .*

> *//It absolutely unlocked something that was there and was never able to to come out because I'd never allowed it to come out and just wanted to ignore. So the growth has been understanding that I have a voice.*

3.6. Skills/Learning

Participants commonly described the workshop in terms of providing tools or skills development; and in the final sequence of the film, *Changing Our Ways*, an interviewee sums up what they want from The Big Anxiety, saying "Simple! Teach us—so we can pass it on". If "learning new skills" was seen as a "drawcard" these skills were not explicitly taught but learned from aesthetic engagement or modelling within the workshop. They were in essence 'learned from experience' in the more technical sense implied by Bion ([1962] 2007) that takes seriously the process by which we enable the capacity to be open to experience: to experience ourselves as alive and real (Ogden 2022, p. 19).

The group's capacity to take on the container function was manifested by those who took on the role of leading a community group. However, within this group there was an acknowledgement of the need to replenish and to keep working on the skills acquired—ideally with occasional access to workshops:

> *You're so excited to do stuff. . .and you get thrown back. I feel like out of this* [last workshop], *we've gotten a lot of direction within the group as well.*

Importantly, the capacity for containment was also perceived at an individual level, not only in terms of processing internal feelings but in the sense of being able to hold and detoxify the projections or pain of others in ways that enabled supportive communication. The description of longer-term benefits notably included improved family relationships. One participant reported drawing on newly acquired skills and "confidence" to support her son through a suicide attempt:

> *. . .talking about how he sees things, how he feels. . .Could I have done that a year ago? Well, no.*

Another "went home and thought, oh my gosh, I've reconnected with my daughter on a level that I didn't know I was missing". Conflicted feelings of grief were also able to be processed; for example,

> *When my father died, I wondered how I would cope with it because of the horrific abuse that he perpetrated upon us. That's a mark of how much growing [I did]—that I had compassion for the person, not the father.*

More generally, participants described a self-sufficiency or self-containment in terms of being at ease with feelings; for example,

> *After having your session I had with you guys, I found that I didn't need to go back to the counselling and I've sort of grown fine with my feelings*

3.7. Progression/Cumulative Effect

Participant C distinguishes her experience of successive Road Trips, ultimately describing the last as "coming home":

> *[In the first] I clearly remember standing there and feeling anger and the grief and the loss with each of those songs as they came through me. And then at the end, just knowing that there had been like a washing down from it because I allowed it to.*
>
> *And on the second one I allowed myself to actually feel it more than just react. . . I had made a conscious decision, given the reaction that I got from that first one and the ability to tap into just writing, [in] the second one I decided to let it go, to actually just allow myself to be a part of the movement.*
>
> *And then the last one, the one in November. . . I was lying there and I actually I took myself away from people because I could feel something. I could feel the disquiet within me. And I knew that it was going to be a bumpy ride on this one. . .And then the part of me that knew what I needed said, oh, fuck it, let yourself go. . .it was just like all that anger was being dispelled. . .*

Participant B, who like C had undertaken both Warwick workshops, plus one in another city, similarly describes a progression, setting this in broader terms of a life journey and family setting:

> *[The first] made a transformation in me from being that quiet person that didn't talk about mental health and suicide, to somebody who felt empowered. I felt like I had a voice again, whereas this one, I think, was more confronting. [It] took me on that self journey of realizing, this is what's happening with you, and now it's time to look at those triggers and address them which is going to be a bit of hard work. In terms of growth, even though obviously I still have moments where I still struggle with my mental health. . .after this workshop, just hearing them say, you know, it's maintenance, like you constantly going to have to work on it like your health, it's a normal thing, that was very reassuring. But*

definitely in every aspect of my life, I look back and I'm like, last year there's no way that I would have had the confidence to apply for a job with children. There's no way I would even be parenting to the level I am now. And be able to confidently stand up for myself as well. That's one of the big ones.

The "growth" reported effectively occurred within a short space of time—after a single two-day engagement, consolidated seven months later. Notably, however, participants were able to identify the process as both fast and unfolding over time—so that even as changes became apparent months later, they were attributed to the workshop experience:

I feel like we've all grown through that process, cause it unpacks a lot of stuff for you in a short amount of time.//

I think it takes about three months after the workshop to come through that healing journey. Because things come up. . .you go, wow. Where did that come from? So I feel like I've been through a whirlwind really. I feel like I've come out of a washer. I can recentre again.

4. Conclusions

In this article we have sought to identify the value of purpose-designed immersive/aesthetic experience for processing trauma and loss, highlighting operative elements and their reported impacts. We have foregrounded the principle of containment—and the model of container/contained—as a means to advance the discussion of what may occur both internally and collectively through the workshop. In particular we have demonstrated the potential for holding and processing feelings associated with trauma with the implication that containment is something that may be taken on by individuals and community groups with enduring effects. While this may be a recognised objective/outcome of longer-term psychodynamic therapy, the implication that an immersive workshop may be effective in this regard in a relatively short time-frame is encouraging.

We have illustrated how immersive media and aesthetic experience support such a process, showing how participants become attuned and resensitised to feelings at multiple levels. This is understood by participants as an antidote to trauma: "that humble trauma-based response [that] stops you from actually embracing who you are". At the most profound level, the workshops facilitated an experiencing of the self as whole:

Who I am now is is really different to who I was before. I am whole. I can honestly say I don't need to numb myself in any way anymore. I am able and happy to face whatever it is that is upsetting me—or the darkness that has been experienced—to work my way through it. So that's phenomenal. I don't think it would have occurred had I not gone. I know I would still be sitting in the same place.

We have set this in the context of relational psychoanalysis in part to conceptualise the process by which a connection to self occurs but also to illuminate the significance of the distinctive way in which aesthetic resources might enable the metabolising of painful feelings. In this regard we effectively distinguish creativity that is transformational from that which is simply transactional. Arts participation is increasingly promoted as good for wellbeing. It may be so for many apparent reasons, including being merely a pleasant distraction. Conversely, arts participation does not *necessarily* promote growth or enable the processing of trauma. Our argument here is not therefore a generic one for the positive value of the arts. Rather, we argue that aesthetic media can be fashioned as powerful resources to be used not only to express complex felt experience but to support the processing of that experience, and in a more holistic sense, to help recreate a palpable and integrated sense of self.

When trauma is understood as cultural and relational rather than as medical/pathological, this opens up a more sophisticated approach to its communication, utilising methods that not only capture sensory and affective experience but allow us to work within that register. Cultural programs also place resources in the hands of people in communities. In Australia alone it is estimated that the cost of unprocessed trauma may be as high as $24 billion a

year (Kezelman et al. 2015, p. 10). The question of how we provide trauma responsive support is therefore a pressing one, especially as individual psychotherapy remains costly and unavailable to the majority. Cultural practice will be critical to filling this immense gap, not by offering therapy per se but by diversifying the field to include accessible cultural programs and resources evolved for use in community contexts. We have shown the potential for leveraging creative design and immersive media to this end.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci13010020/s1.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.B., M.W., G.K. and L.G.; data collection, G.K. and L.G.; writing—original draft preparation, J.B.; review, G.K., M.W. and L.G.; empirical design of workshop: M.W. and J.B.; project administration, J.B.; funding acquisition, J.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Australian Government's Research Council. Jill Bennett is the recipient of an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship FL170100131.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was approved by Human Research Ethics Committee, University of New South Wales, Australia HC17649.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The film *Changing our Ways* is available for public screening. Because participants consented to appear in the film, this renders the data identifiable in some respects; access to original interview data is therefore restricted.

Acknowledgments: We acknowledge and thank the community participants of Warwick Queensland.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 On the devastating and lasting impact of colonisation on the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, see (Dudgeon and Walker 2015).

2 The Road Tripis not a music therapy intervention (see Landis-Shack et al. 2017), but an engagement conceptualised within a psychosocial paradigm. The selection of music may vary for each Road Trip workshop but its structure informs the choice of tracks. See playlist structure provided as supplementary material.

3 See video at https://feel-lab.org/research_projects/perinatal-dreaming-understanding-country/suicide (accessed on 19 September 2023).

References

Alford, C. Fred. 2018. Trauma and psychoanalysis: Freud, Bion, and Mitchell. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 23: 43–53. [CrossRef]

Article One and The Big Anxiety. 2023. Changing Our Ways [Film]. Australia. Available online: https://www.unsw.edu.au/news/2023/10/arts-festival-brings-healing-to-a-town-impacted-by-suicide (accessed on 19 September 2023).

Atkinson, Judy. 2002. *Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in indigenous Australia*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.

Benjamin, Jessica. 2018. *Beyond Doer and Done to: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*. New York/Milton Park: Routledge

Bennett, Jill, and Lynn Froggett. 2019. Aesthetic Intelligence. In *Thinking in the World: A Reader*. Edited by Jill Bennett and Mary Zournazi. London: Bloomsbury.

Bennett, Jill, Gail Kenning, Lydia Gitau, Rebecca Moran, and Marianne Wobcke. 2023. Transforming Trauma through an Arts Festival: A Psychosocial Case Study. *Social Sciences* 12: 249. [CrossRef]

Bennett, Jill, Lynn Froggett, and Lizzie Muller. 2022. Facilitating Environments: An Arts-Based Psychosocial Design Approach. In *The Big Anxiety: Taking Care of Mental Health in Times of Crisis*. Edited by Jill Bennett. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Bion, Wilfred R. 1993. *Attention and Interpretation*. London: Maresfield Library. First published 1970.

Bion, Wilfred R. 2007. *Learning from Experience*. London: Karnac Books. First published 1962.

Bollas, Christopher. 1992. *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience*, 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bollas, Christopher. 2019. *Forces of Destiny: Psychoanalysis and Human Idiom*. New York and Milton Park: Routledge. [CrossRef]

Caper, Robert. 2020. *Bion and Thoughts too Deep for Words: Psychoanalysis, Suggestion, and the Language of the Unconscious*, 1st ed. The Routledge Wilfred R. Bion Studies Book Series. Milton: Routledge.

Dudgeon, Pat, and Roz Walker. 2015. Decolonising Australian Psychology: Discourses, Strategies, and Practice. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3: 276–97. [CrossRef]

Evolve Communities. n.d.a Comprehending the Difference Between Land and Country. Available online: https://www.evolves.com.au/connection-to-country/#:~:text=Country%20doesn%E2%80%99t%20just%20refer,home%20for%20First%20Nations%20people (accessed on 20 September 2023).
Evolve Communities. n.d.b Yarning Circle Meaning and Importance for Australian Indigenous Culture. Available online: https://www.evolves.com.au/yarning-circle-meaning-and-importance-for-australian-indigenous-culture/ (accessed on 20 September 2023).
Figlio, Karl, and Barry Richards. 2003. The Containing Matrix of the Social: Article View. *American Imago* 60: 407. [CrossRef]
Giffney, Noreen. 2021. *The Culture-Breast in Psychoanalysis: Cultural Experiences and the Clinic. Psychoanalysis and Popular Culture*. Milton Park, Abingdon and Oxon: Routledge.
Hustvedt, Siri, and Jill Bennett. 2022. Why do art therapies work? In *The Big Anxiety: Taking Care of Mental Health in Times of Crisis*. Edited by J. Bennett. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 17–27.
Kezelman, Cathy, Nick Hossack, Pam Stavropoulos, and Pip Burley. 2015. *The Cost of Unresolved Childhood Trauma and Abuse in Adults in Australia*. Sydney: Adults Surviving Child Abuse and Pegasus Economics Available online: https://blueknot.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-cost-of-unresolved-trauma_budget-report-fnl_compressed.pdf (accessed on 19 September 2023).
Landis-Shack, Nora, Adrienne J. Heinz, and Marcel O. Bonn-Miller. 2017. Music therapy for posttraumatic stress in adults: A theoretical review. *Psychomusicology: Music, Mind, and Brain* 27: 334–42. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Mitrani, Judith L. 2015. *Psychoanalytic Technique and Theory: Taking the Transference*, 1st ed. London: Routledge.
Ogden, Thomas H. 2019. Ontological Psychoanalysis or "What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?". *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 88: 661–84. [CrossRef]
Ogden, Thomas H. 2022. *Coming to Life in the Consulting Room: Toward a New Analytic Sensibility*. New York and Milton Park: Routledge. [CrossRef]
Prevention and Response to Violence Abuse and Neglect Government Relations (PARVAN). 2023. *Integrated Trauma Informed Care Framework: My Story, My Health, My Future*. NSW Health (Australia). Available online: https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/patients/trauma/Publications/itic-framework.pdf (accessed on 18 September 2023).
Randall, Tjilp Bob. 2013. Kanyini: Unconditional Love and Responsibility. Available online: https://kanyini.org/tjilpi-bob-randall/ (accessed on 19 September 2023).
Salter, Michael. 2019. In interview. In *Course of Empathy*. Edited by Natasha Ginnivan. Sydney: fEEL (Felt Experience and Empathy Lab).
San Roque, Craig. 2006. On Tjukurrpa, Painting up, and Building Thought. *Social Analysis* 50: 148–72. [CrossRef]
Ungunmerr, Miriam-Rose. 1988. Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness. Available online: https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/ (accessed on 22 September 2023).
Ungunmerr-Baumann, Miriam-Rose, Rachel A. Groom, Emma L. Schuberg, Judy Atkinson, Caroline Atkinson, Ruth Wallace, and Gavin Morris. 2022. Dadirri: An Indigenous place-based research methodology. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 18: 94–103. [CrossRef]
Wright, Deborah L. S. 2022. *The Physical and Virtual Space of the Consulting Room: Room-Object Spaces*. London: Routledge.
Zeavin, Lynne. 2011. Review of Bion Today. In *Society For Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology, Division 39, American Psychological Association*. Edited by Birkstead-Breen Dana and Mawson Chris. Fall, p. 464. Available online: https://www.apadivisions.org/division-39/publications/reviews/bion-today (accessed on 19 September 2023).