Good afternoon everyone,

Before I begin my discussion, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, the Whadjuk Noongar People, on whose land we are meeting, and pay my respects to the Elders both past, present and future.

My discussion today centers around Aboriginal heritage in Perth – more specifically “urban, European-associated Aboriginal heritage”, which are places that are either European-built or designed or are associated with European culture that are also significant for Aboriginal people.

I will be discussing how areas of positive urban, European-associated Aboriginal heritage is underrepresented in Perth’s heritage tourism and education and provide recommendation as to how to counteract that underrepresentation through the presentation of a heritage place. That being the Coolbaroo Club, which I will introduce to you shortly.

Firstly, it is important to understand the scope of Indigenous tourism in Australia and more specifically Western Australia. With roughly 3 million visitors to Australia participating in Indigenous tourism a year (Bailey and Jago 2012) and 66% of visitors to Western Australia participating in Indigenous tourism (Tourism Western Australia 2015) it is clear that the tourism experiences on offer reach many people and influence how they perceive Aboriginal communities and culture. It is therefore important that Indigenous tourism reflects accurate and broad aspects of that culture.

In saying this though, there are areas of Aboriginal history and culture that are not represented significantly in Perth’s Indigenous tourism and education and this is something I initially became aware of growing up in Perth prior to my research.

As a tourist looking for Aboriginal tours and experiences on offer in Perth it’s likely that you would do a simple Google search to see what options are available. What you’ll find when you do this search is that the Indigenous tourism options on offer are not all-encompassing of Aboriginal culture and history. Rather there is a focus on two broad categories.

The first category focuses predominantly on distinctive Aboriginal cultural practices that have stemmed and continued from traditional, pre-European times. Many Aboriginal tourism companies offer experiences such as didgeridoo playing, dot painting, the chance to try local bush tucker or witness a traditional performance by dancers in traditional dress. Such experiences demonstrate unique and distinct aspects of Aboriginal culture, which are appealing to tourists wanting Indigenous experiences, who seek out such difference and uniqueness. They are also viewed predominantly as positive heritage experiences because of this reflection of uniqueness and also because many of the experiences on offer are associated with positive aspects of culture, such as celebration, dance, music and the sharing of food.

The second category that became apparent from the research was heritage experiences or places that are associated with the negative interactions between Aboriginal people and Europeans. Places such as Fremantle Prison, Wadjemup/Rottnest Island and Moore River
Native Settlement. These places are often big tourist attractions and provide tourist experiences but as they were places of incarceration and institutionalisation they are uncomforting reminders of past injustices for the Aboriginal community and therefore seen as examples of negative heritage.

While these two categories provide a varied choice of tourist attractions and activities there are still aspects of Aboriginal history and culture that are not explored in the same way. That being, tours or experiences that centre around positive urban European-associated Aboriginal heritage places, which I introduced to you at the start of this discussion.

This is something that I personally questioned and initially triggered my research. Having grown up in Perth and wanting to learn more about Aboriginal culture, I never had the opportunity to learn about urban, modern Aboriginal histories or places that were positive until university. I’m not saying that there are absolutely no experiences or places on offer, but accessing information on these experiences or places online, which is what I would do as a tourist or an educator, is not readily available – which is the point I’m trying to make. It is hard for people to find such places or experiences to interact with.

I therefore aimed to find, or at least attempt to find, a heritage place or experience that reflected positive European-associated heritage that had significance for Aboriginal people. That led me to The Coolbaroo League, known also as the Coolbaroo Club.

The Coolbaroo League, which later led to the Coolbaroo Club, was an Aboriginal social club that arranged and ran weekly dances in the East Perth area, and later in rural areas, in the 1940s and 50s. At a time when the 1936 Native Administrative Act was prevalent and Aboriginal people were subject to its strict and unfair regulations and treatment, the Coolbaroo dances were reflective of Aboriginal self-determination, resistance and the importance of community togetherness and fun.

From 1927 to 1954, the City of Perth was declared a Prohibited Area. This meant that it was considered an offence for any Aboriginal person to cross the five-kilometre boundary around the city after 6pm. This example of discrimination, along with the constant pressure of possible institutionalisation, the relentless police presence and general disdainful treatment were all enforced by these government acts making life extremely difficult for Aboriginal people.

However, just as individuals experienced hardship so too did the community collectively, and it was this feeling of solidarity and community togetherness, which was extremely important in helping Aboriginal people through such hard times.

As told in the film the Coolbaroo Club, written by Stephen Kinnane, it was when four individuals in 1947 came together with a shared understanding of the importance of community and a shared outrage in the ways that Aboriginal people were being treated that a beneficial idea was formed. European – Australian soldier Geoff Harcus, who had befriended many Aboriginal soldiers in the war and did not like the way they were treated, along with fellow servicemen Jack and Bill Poland, brothers from Yamitji country, and young
Aboriginal political activist Helena Clarke – met and through their discussions came up with an idea of a social club run by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people.

While it was an Aboriginal-run venture the idea behind the club was to “bridge the barriers between Aboriginal and European communities” and so European people were permitted to join in on the dances and activities arranged by invitation only. Coolbaroo – the Yamaji word for magpie was suggested as the name of the club, in being representative of black and white coming together and the identities of mixed race.

The Coolbaroo League dances were organised in halls across the city, wherever the organisers were able to find a space. One of the areas was at the Pensioner’s Hall just near the East Perth Station at 24 Edward Street, East Perth. It later moved to Braille Hall on the Corner of Newcastle and Stirling Streets, opposite Weld Square.

The dances quickly became known throughout East Perth and the wider city, and all ages of the Aboriginal Community began to attend regularly. Much-loved Aboriginal musicians such as Ronnie Kickett and Gladys Bropho performed at the dances regularly and the addition of jazz tunes helped create an entertaining and enjoyable atmosphere. Many international jazz artists would also come to the club and it became a place where people could come and have a good time with one another despite the wider societal pressures. Local Aboriginal elders such as Bill Bodney and Thomas Bropho endorsed the Coolbaroo League and Club and took part in promoting the space as a positive place for the community.

The Coolbaroo League dances marked a significant place for Aboriginal people. Run by Aboriginal people, they were radical for their time. Those who attended the League dances described it as being the highlight of the week, comparable to nothing else.

The dances were a place where youths could come together and learn how to dance and jive. In fact, as Lauren Marsh and Anna Haebich wrote the dances “offered a safe, creative and fun environment for [all] Aboriginal people to experiment with popular culture”. Including the annual Miss Coolbaroo bathing beauty pageant contest – where local Aboriginal girls would take the stage.

The Coolbaroo League during this time raised their own funds and were able to publish the first edition of their newspaper, The Westralian Aborigine, in 1953, which successfully ran until 1957. The aim of the paper was to provide an alternative news coverage for Aboriginal readers to what mainstream media had to offer. As Marsh and Haebich (2008) discuss, The Westralian Aborigine, was one of the first newspapers of its kind in Australia. It carried on as a “mechanism for strengthening” a sense of cultural identity, community and self-determination.

The Coolbaroo Club was a platform for Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people to come together, voice their rights and determine their lives, regardless of the pressures that they faced in the 1940s and 50s. Stephen Kinnane, an author and researcher who has written extensively about the Coolbaroo Club, commented that the Coolbaroo Club is “a positive story, it’s about community taking control, but also being welcoming of non-Indigenous Australians, it’s got a reconciliation element... but the key element to it is it was
all community run and controlled, people funded it themselves... they were keen to ensure it had an impact for their own community”. It was also special in being an entertainment space and an area where people could enjoy music and dance as a community – which indicates the positive role the Coolbaroo Club played in people’s lives.

In being a club that draws from a European template, being inclusive of European people and being located in European buildings it is an example of Positive, urban, European-associated Aboriginal heritage.

So how do we make the memory and history of the Coolbaroo Club accessible to people today? Well the Coolbaroo Club/League has been a focus of multiple exhibits within Perth – put on by the City of Perth in 2010 as well as The University of Western Australia in 2014. Even last year in July in Weld Square a permanent art instalment was erected detailing the Coolbaroo Club’s history and significance, but it is not on a scale that makes it really attractive as an experience or place to visit for tourists, students or even regular citizens – it’s not something that can be easily searched online as an activity to do. It would be great to have a more permanent, engaging heritage space that people can come and interact with to learn more about what an amazing initiative and place the Coolbaroo League or Club was.

When thinking about how this could be approached – making the memory of the Coolbaroo Club into a permanent space - I looked internationally and made comparisons with heritage places that were of a similar time, in the 1940s and 50s, and were representative of the self-determination that certain communities within wider society demonstrated through entertainment, music and social togetherness in times of mistreatment and racial discrimination. Most importantly the places I focused on and made comparisons with have become successful heritage places where people are both informed about the history and significance of the place but are also provided with an engaging and interactive experience that reflects part of what makes these places important – that being jazz, music and dance.

The first place I comparatively explored is a heritage space that is known as the Ritz Theatre and Museum in LaVilla, Jacksonville in Florida. The Ritz Museum explores the history of the Ritz and the wider LaVilla area of the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s, which was and still is an important entertainment and business space for the African American Community

The shops, clubs and other businesses along one particular street, known as “The Great Black Way”, provided a separate niche for the African American community, who constantly faced European American racism, were not welcome in white areas and who created these new areas as a response. In these areas, a sense of community and resilience was fostered through the shared segregation, but also through a shared enjoyment of jazz music, which was raised through the nightlife areas in LaVilla.

The Ritz Theatre was a symbol of this time in being an area where many came to listen to jazz and be entertained. It has since been restored in 1996 to include a museum, where people can come to learn about the history and significance of the place, as well as an entertainment, theatre space, where people can come to hear jazz and other performances.
What is great about the Ritz is that it reflects the original function of the space and the original values of the space – which was the importance of music and dance in bringing people together and instilling a sense of empowerment and celebration of community despite the societal pressures put against those that the Ritz held significance for.

The second comparison I explored was The Sophiatown Heritage and Cultural Centre, known as Sophiatown the Mix, in Sophiatown, Johannesburg. The centre is comprised of both a newly constructed memorial building and community centre as well as an original 1930s home, now a national heritage site and museum.

Sophiatown was one of the few areas in Johannesburg where African South Africans were able to own land before the enactment of the 1923 Urban Areas Act. In being able to own property the African South African community flourished as the population grew.

Like LaVilla, the heavy concentration of Africans led to an intensity of culture and in particular jazz culture. Many jazz greats were born from Sophiatown and it was recognised as a jazz area, where people across Johannesburg would come to listen to jazz.

However, Sophiatown flourished as apartheid was beginning and the strong demonstrations of African culture became problematic for the Native Affairs Commission, who saw the area of Sophiatown as a “hotbed of African resistance”.

Consequently, Sophiatown was destroyed by the government in 1955 when 2000 armed policemen stormed the suburb, forcibly removed the residents and eventually demolished many of the homes. Despite protest, Sophiatown was rebuilt as a “whites-only” suburb in 1962 and renamed Triomf – a symbolic name representative of apartheid values.

However, due to the importance of the original Sophiatown suburb to African culture, in 2006, as part of a long-term initiative or repatriation and recognition following the end of apartheid, Triomf was renamed Sophiatown once more. The city of Johannesburg purchased and restored one of three original homes from the original Sophiatown and converted to the museum, later extending it to include a modern community building – the entire initiative is known as Sophiatown the Mix.

By day it is a community space that runs many programs for youths in the area. By night the centre “harks back to the area’s cultural past by transforming to a performance venue”, hosting arts, film, theatre and intimate jazz encounters. Jazz performance events are what Sophiatown the Mix is most prominently known for, where world-class jazz musicians, both local and from across the African continent come to Sophiatown the Mix to perform.

It is this continuance of jazz music culture as well as the arts at Sophiatown the Mix that is so significant, as it not only provides visitors with an understanding of what made Sophiatown so special but it also allows visitors to enjoy intimately the same things that were enjoyed historically in that same area. And it is the combination of the museum, exhibition space and live performance space that that makes Sophiatown so successful – which is similarly the case for the Ritz.
The huge successes of the Ritz and Sophiatown the Mix as heritage spaces today are important in understanding how the Coolbaroo Club can also be publicly presented, which parallels in many ways, in being an entertainment space where Aboriginal people came to listen to music, dance and enjoy themselves despite the societal pressures against them. It is the entertainment aspect which I recognised as really leading to the successes in providing a heritage experience that was a bit different.

Like the Ritz and Sophiatown, music at the Coolbaroo Club was a way for members to engage with popular culture and to feel a part of the society they lived in. It was responsible for the place being viewed as positive heritage. In thinking how to present the Coolbaroo Club as a more permanent, engaging tourist/education heritage place the music and entertainment aspect is important to include in being successful.

What is exciting about these transnational comparisons is the museum/exhibition space and the engaging, entertainment space combination. People are given the opportunity to learn about the history and significance of the space but also be entertained in the same way that those who originally interacted with the places were. So, this gives another draw card for visitors to the heritage place that is different from your standard museum/heritage exhibit.

Presenting the memory of the Coolbaroo Club in such a way within Perth could also show similar successes, especially in creating a performance space that predominantly presents contemporary Indigenous music and musicians as there are not many exclusive Indigenous music venues in Perth. Or many that are easily accessible for tourists or those wanting to experience such performances.

In being presented in such a way the exhibition element to the space would teach people the history and significance of the Coolbaroo Club, while the performance element would entertain and be continuous of the original aspects and values of the Coolbaroo Club – that being music, entertainment and dance.

Perhaps being presented in this different way would also attract different crowds of people within Perth who may not have been interested in visiting a typical exhibition-only heritage place or museum?

I discussed this idea with Stephen Kinnane, who is a writer and expert on the Coolbaroo Club and whose grandparents and parents were involved with the Club, as well as Barbara Bynder who created the Wildflower Dreaming exhibition on the Coolbaroo League at UWA in 2014 and whose mother and aunt were members of the League, and both agreed that the Coolbaroo Club is important for more people know about and that the presentation of the place as a live performance and exhibition venue was exciting. Talking to other senior members of the Noongar community also gave way to an understanding that this was an extremely special place and that young West Australians would benefit from knowing more about it.

Despite the exact ways of presenting the place, what this all comes back to, is that presenting a heritage space such as the Coolbaroo Club within todays tourism/education arenas in such a permanent and engaging way would help counter the lack of positive urban
European-associated Aboriginal heritage places – because the Coolbaroo Club is such a place within Perth. The Coolbaroo Club was truly an amazing initiative that many people would benefit from knowing about and it reflects a type of heritage that we don’t often see.

While I am providing a recommendation in this talk – the purpose is to get you thinking about possibilities that could be explored within Perth. It was designed as more of a discussion of potential. I hope I have introduced an idea that also gets you thinking about Aboriginal heritage in Perth broadly and the different ways it can possibly be explored. What I’ve spoken about today could be one such way.

Many thanks for your attention.

Gemma Wilson, May 2017

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