STITCHING SPEAR-GRASS SINEW AND SKIN;

CRAFTING NEW SOCIAL MEMORIES AT THE KOORIE HERITAGE TRUST

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Masters by Research

December 2012

School of Social and Political Sciences
The University of Melbourne

Printed on archival quality paper
Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the revival of Aboriginal craft practices and the crafting of social memory among artists at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne.

‘Koorie’, or ‘Koori’, is a collective term used to describe the Aboriginal people of south eastern Australia – an area made up of approximately thirty-eight discrete language groups. Although the languages themselves are no longer widely spoken, individuals identify with these bounded groups. Each of the language groups are tied to a specific region or ‘Country’, set of totems, and collection of creation stories, all of which contribute to how individuals identify themselves within the wider Koorie community.

Since the mid-Nineteenth century, Koorie cultural practices had been systematically eroded by the pressures of European colonialism. Until the late 1960's and early 1970's, it appeared that the only craft practices surviving were to service tourism and the tastes and whims of white Australians. The 1970's saw the emergence of an Aboriginal cultural, political, and artistic movement which was the beginning of changing perceptions of what made aboriginal art 'authentic'.

The Koorie Heritage Trust was established in 1985 in an effort to preserve, protect, and promote Aboriginal culture of south eastern Australia. This began with the establishment of a ‘Keeping Place’, where material culture could be collected, housed, and cared for in culturally appropriate ways.

This thesis examines more recent examples of craft revival by Koorie artists, which include possum skin cloaks, kangaroo tooth necklaces, and grass baskets. Each of these items emerged from their creators’ bringing together of information sources through museum and archival records, the artists’ existing understanding of cultural practices, and their innate, intuitive, ‘Ancestral knowledge’. The exploration of these sites and means of cultural production requires the consideration of three central themes: the concept of time, which informs how the artists comprehend their past; knowledge, which is concerned with how these artists come to be proficient in their ‘know-how’; and finally, how this knowledge is understood to be embodied and enacted in the lived in world.

This thesis demonstrates how, as these artists engage in the revival of craft practices, notions of time, knowledge and the role of the body transform, and so too does an understanding of social memory.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) this thesis comprises only of my original work towards the Masters except where indicated in the Preface,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is 33956 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices

__________________________
Ruth Oliphant
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I must thank my friends, colleagues, and mentors at the Koorie Heritage Trust for their support, guidance and patience as I occupied their space and bothered them with questions. Thank you to Maree Clarke and Len Tregonning for kindly and generously sharing with me your stories and artworks; Vicki Couzens for relaying her stories so eloquently - despite the fact we never got round to a formal interview this thesis is enriched with her voice. My time at the Koorie Heritage Trust, as a research student, volunteer, and receptionist was rewarding in so many ways and that was thanks to the staff throughout the organisation. I hope this thesis gives a little something back.

The curatorial staff at the Trust welcomed me in, guided me, and educated me and for that I must extend my warm thanks; Miriam Troon, Chris Keeler, Nerissa Broben and Judy Williams. Jodie Dowd, who was a curatorial cadet during my fieldwork, not only took me under her wing and shared stories and ideas with me, but became a great friend: thank you.

My supervisor, Dr Tamara Kohn, has the patience of a saint! Whenever I became overcome with work, irresolute and hopeless, or I shied away for fear of ‘getting it wrong’, she buoyed me up, provided constructive criticism, pointed me towards ‘must-reads’, and diligently trawled her way through confused and unfinished drafts, and for all that I must offer her a huge thank you. Other members of the department also have lent support throughout this process, thank you to Monica Minnegal and Paul Green.

My peers at Melbourne University, with whom I embarked on this journey, and some whom I met along the way while walking their parallel paths, have provided encouragement, advice, stimulating conversations, offered an immense amount of fun, and wonderful friendships. Thank you so much to Megan Lafferty, Anais Gerard, Morgan Harrison, Nadiya Cushak, Tracey Parhor, John Burgess, Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins, Kim Neylon, and Zoya Gill.

Having moved to Melbourne from the UK shortly before beginning this project I never imagined the incredible network of friends I would develop. Without them to provide a balance of work and play, I doubt this thesis would ever have reached a conclusion. Especially thank you to Maree Ross, Jeff King, Britt Salt, and Jon Hewitt. Thanks also must be extended to Belinda Vaughn who was a wonderfully patient and considerate employer and friend during my last few months of candidature.
My parents have been a continual source of support from afar. Never doubting me, when I doubted myself - they provided love, encouragement, and advice whenever I asked for it, and even when I didn’t.

Last, but certainly not least, I must thank my partner and best friend, Simon Christie. Without his patience, support and love I do not know where I would be.
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Chapter One

Stitching Spear-Grass, Sinew and Skin:
An Introduction

_We saw the original one at the museum and then I got a possum jaw from a brushtail that was on the side of the road... and that was when we made that one up into the engraving too... But in doing that I went and asked three Uncles for permission because you know, we haven’t made these things for ages – in the old days there used to be a whole process. Learning and then waiting until you were ready to be taught that. But in our case we were forbidden... Yeah, it wasn’t reinventing, it was just rejuvenating. It was an old practice that was kind of not done._ Len Tregonning, 2011

The possum jaw protruded from the bulbous layering of stringy bark twine - which Len had made from rubbing lengths of the bark between his palms turning it into a thick, strong, fibrous thread. The twine bound the jaw to a wooden stick around half a foot long, but beneath the layers of string it was also set in place with a cement-like mixture which he had concocted from grinding up shells and mixing them with resin and tree gum.

_It’s important, you know – no one’s made those things for generations. It’s important for me to feel close to my Ancestors – the ones who used these kinds of tools all the time, but also important to remember how things were made and how we used to use all these materials._

I had met Len during the eighteen months I had spent volunteering as a curatorial volunteer at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne’s city centre, which was also my field site. Len was an Aboriginal man from Gippsland, a long-time employee at the Trust, and a craft person – or, as he called himself ‘not an artist, more of an implementer’. He was pragmatic and innovative and was a key player in the revival of several craft practices which had not been practiced within the Koorie community for generations.

As my time in the Trust went on I came across numerous examples of craft revival projects which had been established despite the inadequate, incomplete records of how such artefacts were made prior to European contact. Since 1835, when the first European settlement was established in Victoria, Koorie cultural practices had been systematically eroded by the forcible movement of the people from their Country, the introduction of disease, and the disruption brought to the traditional ways of life by the
more blatant assimilation policies which prohibited any craft production that was not endorsed by the Government. As Len went on,

*People on the missions were allowed to make boomerangs for tourists but they weren’t allowed to make anything with cultural significance that they would use themselves, so yeah, it’s nice to see that change.*  
Len 2011

This thesis examines how contemporary Koorie artists utilize these fragmentary archival and museum sources to recreate these old crafted artefacts in culturally appropriate ways, and how these artists understand the relationship between these making processes and the generation of a new kind of ‘social memory’ – an intersection which appeared to be a-buzz with activity during my time in the field.

The Trust was a hub for the Koorie community; a place where contemporary and traditional artefacts were housed and exhibited side by side, and a space where artists work, gather and collaborate. As Len once said, ‘...art and culture is one – you can’t separate the two – it’s all part of ceremony, hunting tools, everyday artefacts’. This seemingly irrefutable relationship between art and Koorie culture is echoed throughout the Trust’s building, as exhibitions are prepared, installed, and taken down, works are produced and sold, the collections’ teams register their latest accessions, the rejuvenation of old practices and innovation of new, are all celebrated as expressions of contemporary ‘Koorieness’.

The word ‘Koori’ or ‘Koorie’, meaning ‘people’, is a collective term used to described the Aboriginal people of south eastern Australia (Keeler and Couzens 2010:221), incorporating both the Kulin and Gunnai nations which are each constituted of a handful of tribes, with each tribe made up of several clans (*fig. 1*). The Kulin spreads over south-central Victoria including what is now the urban centre, Melbourne while the Gunnai nation stretches east – to the hills and the lakes of the area now known as Gippsland, and over the border into New South Wales (Presland 1994). Collectively this Koorie region was made up of approximately 38 language groups (www.vaclang.org.au). It is these language groups by which Koorie people often introduce and identify themselves, though much of the language itself is no longer spoken. As Maree, a well-known established Koorie artist and one of my key participants, explained to me when I asked her how she introduces herself, ‘I say... Yorta-Yorta - Mutti-Mutti, and then my Country which is the Murray-Darling I think, so they know that I’m not just from Victoria’.

The relationship between bodily enskilment and social memory is framed in a politically potent post-colonial context where the Aboriginal people of south eastern Australia have survived systematic and often brutal attempts by British settlers to subdue and ultimately eliminate Koorie culture, with the aim of assimilating Koorie people into a ‘White’ Australia. Traditional skills from hunting to
basketry were abandoned (or adapted to produce products deemed commercially desirable by the European settlers), and stories and rituals were silenced in favour of survival. Social memories became ones of loss, sacrifice, defiance, and survival.

This highly sensitive cultural and political complex is approached with an acute awareness of the apparent irony of my pursuit and objectives: I am a British woman, and I am student of anthropology – a discipline which is closely associated with colonialism and has a reputation for relegating the communities of study to primitive, inferior Otherness.

Of course, I am not the first researcher to observe and participate in this; numerous contemporary anthropologists have studied Australian Aboriginal art in various contexts, including studies of craft revival and the assertion of traditional styles and techniques in a contemporary context. As Kleinert and Neale note in their preface to The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture, ‘[n]ew research areas have been opened up in response to Indigenous people’s engagement in the process of reclamation, retrieval and revitalisation, and the need to redress historical imbalances and imposed silences’ (2000:vi). Lorraine Gibson for example, conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Wilcannia, New South Wales, and is interested in ‘[t]he intersections between Aboriginal peoples, anthropologists, museum collections and published literature, and the network of relations between ... [which] have interesting synergies that play themselves out in the production of art and culture’ (Gibson 2008b: 67), an ambition not dissimilar to my own (cf. Gibson 2008a; Gibson 2008c; Kleinert 2000a; Myers 2002).

While positioning this work amongst existing literature is, of course, vital in building upon current anthropological theory and methodology, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into an expansive literature review on south eastern Aboriginal art. While key literature is introduced and woven into the body of this thesis, the substance and structure of this thesis will come from my ethnographic narrative and the practical poetics involved in the processes I explore.

In recent years Koorie artists have been rejuvenating skills as they reinterpret and remake traditional artefacts – it is suspected some of which have not been made for over 150 years. The artists draw upon their own and fellow community members existing cultural knowledge and memories to guide these ventures, as well as engaging in historical and archival research in an attempt to locate the documented interpretations of their culture by Western amateur anthropologists and collectors in the Nineteenth century. This thesis will explore how these processes, the engagement and enskilment of the body in cultural knowledge and craft, generates, or brings to light, social collective memories which have been often obscured by the popular dominant European histories.

I learnt how artists pulled dried grasses through their fingers, up, over, in and out, to create a tightly woven eel trap; drew sinew of a kangaroo tail through their teeth, chewing on it until it is exactly the
right elasticity to bind kangaroo teeth to the leather band of a necklace; adjusted their hands just-so and applied the correct amount of pressure so that a chisel created the perfect curve of a kangaroo’s back on a wooden shield. As I observed and listened, I asked questions about how they know how to do these things and I explored how they incorporated information about historical artefacts, inscribed in texts written over a hundred and fifty years ago, into the skilled bodily practices they display in the making of their contemporary facsimiles. I observed how these objects appeared to have stimulated an understanding and dialogue about the past both in the moment of making and, subsequently in their finished forms; a new kind of social memory.

While exploring this relationship between social memory and enskilment three central themes emerged: time, knowledge, and the body. Chapter by chapter this thesis will tell stories of how these artists understand these themes; how in the course of researching and making these artists reflect on notions of time, of knowledge, and of their own and others’ bodies.

Each of these stories of creativity emerged through interactions, observations, and events at the Koorie Heritage Trust between April 2010 and October 2011. What follows is a brief tour of this dynamic space, and an introduction to the protagonists of these stories who are also, to a large extent, the story tellers.

The ‘Field’

The Koorie Heritage Cultural Centre sat on corner of King Street and Little Lonsdale Street in the west of Melbourne’s central business district, sharing its block with the sprawling hospitality and tourism college, the William Angliss Institute. A solid, curved awning painted red reached out over the footpath providing shelter for smokers and those who arrive before the electronic doors slid open for the first time at ten o’clock each morning. ‘Koorie Heritage and Cultural Centre’ was spelt out in neat black letters against the red curve. Beneath, the electronic doors sprung to life each time a pedestrian passed by, opening the place up with a spurt of energy - pedestrians could steal a quick glance at what lay within: a gallery space to the right and straight ahead a stairwell wrapped around what looked like a gum tree towering up through the ceiling. A zigzag of red and black stretched across the middle of the glass panels and then, at the centre where the two glass doors met, on one side a black hand, and on the other a white hand – reaching for one others’ handshake and coming together when the doors came to rest.

This is the site of political and artistic activity for the Koorie Community in Melbourne and wider Victoria. A museum, a meeting point, a learning space, a generative space for creativity, and a keeping place - a repository of thousands of artefacts, paintings, photographs, documents, and
recordings, and my field site. Here I worked as a curatorial volunteer, receptionist, and researcher for close to eighteen months.

Through the sliding doors, the reception desk curved away to the left, stretching into the small gift shop in the opposite corner, for which it also functioned as a check-out. Meanwhile, immediately in front of the main doors, stood a towering Red River gum tree which was rooted in the very middle of the room and reached up through the ceiling, with the staircase wrapping around it. The trunk was scarred with the long pointed, oval - evidence it once provided the bark for a canoe. The dappled grey-green-white-blue bark bulged at the edge of the wound where it had healed and repaired its outer skin. The wide staircase spiralled around the tree up to the first floor, where your eyes would come level with the canopy which was crowned by a stuffed eagle-hawk and its nest. The eagle-hawk represented Bunjil, the Kulin¹ nation’s totem, creator and spiritual leader. Squakwing, rustling, buzzing, humming met your ears as audio effects are triggered. It is at this point the paint work on the tree seemed to have been a little more awkward, the detail is less precise and the branches did not bow and stretch out at such convincing angles – and one began to suspect this was not, as it first appeared, an ‘actual’ Red River Gum. The tree was in fact cast from a living Red River gum in 1988 using latex and the fibre glass, and has been a centre piece for Trust’s exhibition space ever since.

The Trust spread over three floors with numerous exhibition spaces, a library, an education suite, a large board room, a gift shop, and then, behind the scenes, a network of offices and collection rooms to which entry was only permitted if you possessed the correct combination of electronic swipe-cards and keys. Many of these spaces are explored in greater depth in the forthcoming chapters.

The people I met within these spaces, who I also introduce in the following chapters provided, me with practical access to the backstage of the Trust, but also patiently educated me about the workings of the Trust and the wider Koorie community.

Nestled at the back of the library, behind several rows of books, was the Collection Team’s office. The Collections Team was headed by Miriam and Nerissa who shared the role of Senior Curator. Each in their early thirties and armed with a postgraduate qualification in Museum Studies, they managed the collections team and acted as the gate keepers to the precious artifacts, paintings, and recordings. Neither of the girls were Aboriginal – Miriam was originally from Sweden but spoke with a definite Australian accent, while Nerissa was born and raised in Victoria. They shared a strong sense of custodianship towards the artifacts they looked after, and went about their daily routines with great caution; painstakingly seeking permissions and advice for the use of images, artifacts, and quotations for display. As museum professionals they demonstrated meticulous sense of responsibility to the

artifacts, but, as became clear over the course of research, the protocols of Museums Australia were only half the story. The curators also had to ensure the Community felt the management of artifacts was appropriate and respectful. On some occasions Elders were called on to lend advice on items in the collection. As clubs, boomerangs, and shields were turned over in their naked hands, fingers tracing the etched detail, and fists grasped the boomerang as to demonstrate the technique with which to throw it, the white cottoned gloves remained in their plastic bag, untouched, and the Curators’ instinct to follow procedure was abandoned.

Three days a week Chris, the Curator, sat alongside Miriam and Nerissa at the back of the library. Having worked for the Trust on and off since it was established in 1985, she was considered a quiet authority; she had connections throughout both the Museum and Koorie communities after decades of building friendships, and witnessing changes in museum procedure in the handling and collecting of Aboriginal artefacts and the legal battles which led to the establishment of the Trust.

Jodie, the curatorial cadet, and only female Aboriginal member of the team, worked full time at the Trust while working towards her degree in Museum Studies at Deakin University. We were often assigned tasks together, and soon Jodie became my mentor - close in age and with a similar sense of humour we became fast friends.

Through my work with the collections team I met numerous artists and Community members. As they shared their stories of creativity and innovation with me, three of these individuals became key participants in this project. Maree Clarke worked at the Trust within the Exhibitions Team, but was also a well established and well known Koorie artist. Maree was a Yorta Yorta woman, who grew up around north western Victoria. Her work ranged from delicate jewellery, made of echidna quills and kangaroo teeth, to dramatic and confronting installations. Maree engaged in careful archival research to draw on what evidence still existed of cultural practices which had disappeared.

Maree’s good friend, Len Tregonning, whose words opened this thesis, assisted and collaborated with a number of her project, as well as branching out on his own. Len was a Gunnai man, and grew up in Gippsland, and had worked in Aboriginal affairs of one form or another for thirty years. Len worked at the Trust in a number of capacities too, but I got to know him best when he was seconded to the Collections team to take on the role of Access Officer. His role was to encourage and facilitate Community access to the artefacts, images, and texts.

Vicki Couzens was a constant present at the Trust, despite the fact she actually worked for a different organisation which was tucked away on the third floor of the building. Vicki worked for the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL), but had also been co-editing a book with Chris, so frequently visited the Collection team’s office. Vicki was an accomplished weaver and was known within the Trust for her involvement in the making of possum skin cloaks.
Not only did my time the Trust provide me with rich data but also lasting friendships and cherished experiences. However, establishing relationships and negotiating my role at the Trust, as both a curatorial volunteer and a researcher, sometimes presented a challenge. I quickly became aware of the political and social significance of the Trust amongst both the Koorie and non-Koorie communities in Melbourne, and my distinct British accent was an enduring reminder that I was a foreigner, forging my way into them both. While planning my research project I had obediently produced a document which detailed my planed methodological approach, but when it came to it my methods were adopted, adapted, and improvised along the way as I navigated my way through my time in the ‘field’.

Methods and Methodology

Methodological theory provides us with a framework and a set of parameters within which one can conduct field research, and provides us with labels which we can attach to the characters we chose meet – ‘participants’, ‘collaborators’, ‘informants’, and myself as an ‘observer’ and ‘researcher’. It is a reminder of where and how we should position ourselves in order to conduct ‘good research’. However, in actuality, I often forgot these labels as I forged relationships at the Trust as a volunteer, colleague, receptionist, and friend. I do not doubt that I embodied the researcher and observer role without even realising it – as is evident in my scrawled field notes and Trust to-do lists – muddled up throughout my note books, but it was far less explicit than my proposed methodological approach suggests. This section reflects on how this research was approached and executed, and the complex and confronting decision processes required to get there.

Here, I will firstly deal with my use of ‘methods’ – in this instance to be understood as a summary of what I did in the field – the very basic nuts and bolts, and secondly I will consider the broader more philosophical discussions of my ‘methodology’ which informed and problematized my choice of methods and led me to make the decisions I did. This discussion is a combination of my expectations prior to entering the field, and my reflections on what actually happened and the ad-hoc modifications and additions I had to make ‘on the job’.

Methods

When designing a study to achieve the research objectives I had posited, and considering what I wanted to know as a student of anthropology, it became clear much of my research would be carried out through engagement in fieldwork. For almost a century students like me have been going through the discipline’s ‘distinctive apprenticeship – extensive field work...’ (Kuper 1996:1). Once in the ‘field’ I drew upon traditional anthropological research methods for both gathering and recording
data: participant observation, unstructured conversations, and semi-structured interviews, and the scribbling down of all these momentary interactions and dynamics, conversations, gestures, expressions, smells, textures, tastes, and sounds into field notes, which in turn would be untangled and transposed into a clean and clear font in a document with full sentences and paragraphs, alongside transcribed interviews from audio recordings. In addition, I intended to punctuate my findings with archive and library research which I hoped would provided a crucial historical context. This seemed essential when considering my participants’ own use of such sources during research for their various art projects.

At the outset I had developed three key objectives detailing what I wanted to achieve during my time in the field. By investigating the processes of research, production, and display of a selection of artefacts kept at the Trust, I hoped to obtain an understanding of:

- The transmission of cultural knowledge and skills: transposing information from ethnographic records into practical skills, and the final physical product.
- The significance and ‘meanings’ of these finished artefacts to the various parties: the artists, the Koorie community, the Trust curators, and the wider public.
- How the research, production and exhibition of these artefacts affect understandings of Koorie identity for the artists, curators, the Koorie community, and the wider audience of the exhibitions?

In addition to the three objectives above, sometime into my fieldwork I added another: I was striving to get to grips with my participants’ understandings of their social or communal sense of history or past and how this understanding was experienced, developed, or unearthed during the processes of ‘making things’.

To avoid repetition, rather than addressing how I tackled each of these objectives one by one, below I will address how each of the research methods were employed to achieve the objectives and the advantages and foreseeable difficulties each method presented. As my research progressed and I became more familiar with the complexities of the field, I was forced to consider the myriad of problems, challenges, and ethical dilemmas – these will be addressed in the following section.

Participant Observation: observing while participating and observing participants

Participant Observation is often considered as ‘the foundation of cultural anthropology’ (Bernard 1994:136) while some consider it synonymous with ethnographic field work (ibid). Sustained participant observation provides the opportunity for the researcher to record the things that are unspoken, responses, discussions, opinions, gestures which have not been polished for performance in
an interview, and patterns in behaviours and actions that would only be noticed after looking and listening for a period of time. As Kellehear writes about the short comings in other Social Science research methodology, ‘[t]here is... a simple persistent belief that knowledge about people is available simply by asking.’ (Kellehear1993).

When considering what participant observation actually ‘is’, it becomes clear that it can be both observing participants, and observer while participating – two very different roles (ibid) which will both be addressed here. In Bernard’s volume, Research Methods in Anthropology, he considers interviews to be a data collection method which falls under ‘participant observation’ – for the sake of this discussion they will be dealt with as separate methods.

As a researcher and participant

As I negotiated my way into the field I also forged my place as a participant within the daily goings on at the Trust. As I anticipated my work as a curatorial volunteer, two or three days a week, initially only permitted my participation in the administration and more menial tasks involved in the day to day running of a museum-like institution. However, as the months wore on I began participating in decision making processes, staff meetings, logistics, and participating more fully in the research and analysis involved in the curatorial process. This enabled me to observe and record such procedures, discussions and negotiations.

I was invited to attend a handful of events during my time in the field including the opening of an exhibition at the City’s Shrine of Remembrance, a workshop at Melbourne Museum where we learnt about the making of replica artefacts and creative displays, a public lecture at the Wheeler Centre², seminars run by Museums Australia during their annual Conference in 2011, as well as numerous openings and events at the Trust itself. In these instances I was for all intents and purposes a Trust staff member and was privileged with this temporary status.

I also took part in events and activities ran by the Trust as a paying participant which were unrelated to my role as a volunteer. These events included a cross-cultural education programme run by the Trust and a weaving workshop which was run in conjunction with an exhibition.

In my final weeks in the field I was also asked if I would like to take on two weeks of paid work manning the front desk while the regular receptionist was on leave. I jumped at the chance of earning some extra money and getting to see the workings of the Trust from a different angle. I would be the

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² The Wheeler Centre is located in the heart of Melbourne, attached to the State Library and is ‘... a centre dedicated to the discussion and practice of writing and ideas. Through a year-round programme of talks and lectures, readings and debates, we invite you to join the conversation’. Here we attended a talk discussing an essay called Seeing Trunganini about the display and treatment of Indigenous artefacts and art in museums (www.wheelercentre.com/about-us).
first person to arrive in the mornings, turn on the lights and the interactive displays, sort through the mail, redirect calls, and greet visitors and provide any advice they might request.

In each of these instances my role as a participant provided a different perspective on the working of the Trust. I developed friendships and professional relationships which made me feel very much like I was part of the fabric of the place. I was a thread and sometimes lacked the critical distance to recognise my own input into this weave. It is at these moments I would attempt to take a step back from such involvement and instead ‘observe my participants’.

Observing participants

Although this overlaps largely with my experience as a participant myself, it is important to note that I also was able to gain a critical distance by stepping back from interactions and observing dynamics where I was on the very periphery.

After several months at the Trust and having been introduced to the numerous departments and staff members, while people were aware of my connection with the collections team, to many I was little more than a familiar face. I was made aware when the Business Development Manager, Ian, arranged the paperwork for my two weeks as the receptionist, ‘I know your face, you're doing research with the collections girls, aren’t you? ... I didn’t know you were a pom!’ This detachment permitted a more critical distance which enabled more reflexivity – when I removed myself from an interaction I was able to see how decisions and discussions played out with my ‘researcher’ self as a less prominent obstacle. A position which enabled me to also adapted and utilise what Aboriginal communities throughout Australia refer to as Deep Listening.

Deep Listening: Listening in the in-between

Deep listening describes a way of learning, working and being together. It is informed by the concepts of community and reciprocity. It means listening with a sense of responsibility to stories that are told. It also means listening, observing the self as well (Atkinson 2001). Deep Listening involves listening respectfully. It draws on every sense and every part of our being. It can happen in silence. It takes time… Deep Listening is based on stories, silences and the spaces that lie between. As a research methodology, the practice of Deep Listening is an invitation into culturally congruent ways of learning and knowing. Epistemologically, it incorporates multiple ways of knowing (Brearley 2010:13-14).
I first came across the concept of Deep Listening two or three months after I began my field work. I was invited to attend a cross-cultural training course, which was one of several schemes the Trust runs for local businesses, organisations, schools, and universities to increase awareness of the local Aboriginal community and to educate non-Aboriginal Melbournians about Koorie history and culture, and to give some insight into their cosmology and epistemology. I attended a session along with eight others who worked for local government departments.

Len Tregonning led the group. During the morning session Len told us about the Trust’s latest initiatives to achieve the objectives stipulated in their motto, to ‘protect, promote and preserve’ Koorie culture. Len handed us each a square, black, hard-back book and a CD with matching artwork. They were both entitled *Gulpa Ngawal Indigenous Deep Listening.*

*Gulpa Ngawal Indigenous Deep Listening* came from the collaboration between the Trust, RMIT and their Koorie Cohort of Researchers. Koorie Cohort of Researchers was a programme which catered for Koorie community members who wish to undertake research degrees. The student’s research projects were multi-disciplinary and, fundamentally, incorporated Indigenous ‘ways of knowing’ into their methodology. One of these ‘ways of knowing’ was ‘deep listening’ which was likened to a notion of intuition, ‘an inner sense, separate from our intellect’ (Brearley 2010:7).

Deep Listening was a concept that at first I took for granted. ‘Sure, stories are important’ I thought, as I blundered on. It wasn’t until I began to become aware of the complexities of my chosen field that I began to understand that patience and sustained attention to processes and discourses would hopefully result in a penetration of the dense layers of this social, cultural, political and spiritual mesh. However, getting to grips with the concept required research and inadvertent ‘Deep Listening’ of sorts, in itself.

In our Aboriginal way, we learn to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting, and then acting. Our people have passed on this way of listening for 40,000 years (Ungunmerr 2009).

Deep Listening is understood to be a way of learning and knowing deeply rooted in Aboriginal cultures, and while I was aware I was unlikely to grasp the phenomenon in exactly the same vein, I made a conscious effort to incorporate the principles it promotes into my research technique.

As I further engaged in the field, I spent a lot of time listening, thinking, absorbing. It was not always a conscious positioning – as an often shy person and a typical student of research fearful of ‘getting it wrong’, I shrunk back, I recoiled from sharing opinions or participating in larger meetings for fear of saying something foolish, ill-conceived, culturally inappropriate, or insensitive.
Eighteen months seemed a considerable amount of time to spend ‘in the field’ for a project of this size, scope, and a field site so small. However, while there was certainly no finite quantity of data available for harvest from this ‘field’ (for it is dense with it), taking time, quietly listening, and working in this small space enabled access to a depth in the data, the histories, the people, and their stories, as well as breadth. As Indigenous researcher Atkinson stresses:

“Listening invites responsibility to get the story – the information – right, and to be in right relationship... Didarri at deepest level is the search for understanding and meaning” (2001:8).

Deep Listening soon became key to my research approach while simultaneously becoming a central object of study – a way of communication and transmitting cultural knowledge within and between communities.

Deep Listening brings together the post-modern principles of multiple ways of knowing... and the culturally inclusive practices articulated by Indigenous Researchers... When applied as a research methodology, Deep Listening involves taking the time to develop relationships and to listen respectfully and responsibly (Brearley 2010:15).

Semi-structured interviews and conversations

I conducted interviews towards the end of my research which, while not an explicit intention, was necessary, yet had its limitations. As the weeks and months passed my preconceptions and assumptions were challenged and contested constantly. While imperative to my understandings it was also a cause of great anxiety; fearful of revealing my ignorance meant I put off interviews, waiting for a time when I felt sure I was not going to cause offence or look like a fool. The reality was my participants were by this time mostly good friends and friendly acquaintances at the very least. My fears were unfounded – my participants wanted to help me understand, and to make my work accurate. The questions I eventually asked were certainly more astute but the fact they were conducted so close to the end of my field work meant there was little time to build upon themes and ideas they revealed. I conducted two in-depth recorded interviews with Maree and Len but had extensive conversations with many more individuals. Len’s interview took place in the Moogji Lounge while Maree came over to my house one afternoon and we sat in the court yard as I asked her questions, and I drank tea while she smoked. Both Maree and Len gave me permission to record their interviews on my digital Dictaphone, which I later carefully transcribed – Maree’s transcription complete with dogs barking in the back ground. These sessions gave me the opportunity to elicit information, details, ideas, and thoughts which were not readily available in everyday discussions at the Trust.
As a novice curatorial volunteer I was constantly asking questions about protocol and good practice in the museum setting, trying to build my knowledge and increase my competence. My immediate colleagues were keen to aide my understanding, and these continued dialogues. These conversations fuelled much of my general understanding of the Trust. As time went on and my involvement in the Collections Team increased I was invited to participate and listen in on more and more conversations. Each day I would draw my note book from my rucksack and scribble down explanations, opinions, descriptions, and problems that were raised.

Field notes

It became clear that the processes involved in recording my data were as important as the collecting of it. The dilemmas and decisions I made during this process will be described in the following methodology section, but first I will provide an explanation of how I went about recording my time in the field.

Hunched over my desk conducting research for an upcoming exhibition, assembled around one of the library tables during a meeting, or up on the second floor chatting with exhibitions team or the in house graphic designer about the content and layout of the latest piece of marketing material, I would take my note book and whichever writing implement came to hand. As much of my research was carried out in a work space, and the fact I was a research student was common knowledge, my series of brightly coloured A4 notebooks drew little attention. Looking back at my scribbled notes penned in dozens of different inks - black, blue, biros, markers, pencils, I noticed the length and detail of the notes giving away my energy levels and enthusiasm that day– my emphatic underlining of a illuminating statement denoting my excitement, or the tell tale ellipsis reminding me of my doubt and confusion.

The writing up of these notes into prose was not as consistent or regular as most guides to writing field notes stipulate (Emerson et al 1995:39). Despite good intentions, after a full day at the Trust my motivation to ‘write up’ each evening sometimes evaded me. My initial enthusiasm inspired lengthy descriptions of the place and the people, and after a particularly eventful day or event I would find myself writing at great length, but I never ‘evolve[d] a rhythm that balances time spent in the field and time spent writing up notes’ (ibid). None the less my writing developed into a large body of dense description – description which was constructed with the intention of evoking a sense of place, rhythm, and relationships.

Archival Research: Flicking through the ‘rare books’/Clicking through YouTube
Observing artists use of museum, library, and archival resources was a key element of this study, so utilizing the same resources so I could obtain an understanding of the processes was essential. The Trust’s library and Victoria State Library were both utilized for these purposes. My position as a curatorial volunteer also privileged me with access to much of the Trust’s collection; historical documents and photographs which enabled me to engage with the same texts, images and artefacts which inspired the revival processes I am interested in.

What I was not available to access directly was often available online. Resources such as the State Library’s La Trobe Journal proved a rich resource and access to documents which were not always readily available. In addition the Culture Victoria website (www.cv.vic.gov.au) also provided access to photographs, video footage, and excerpts from historical texts.

**Methodology**

The central questions of this research revolved around the vast concepts of knowledge and memory. The inherent ephemeral nature of these themes provoked serious consideration of how the project should be approached methodologically.

A long history of exploitation and abuse between researchers and their ethnographic collaborators has resulted in numerous discussions of the power and politics of representation (Lassiter 2005:4). It was my participants’ (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) fear of such misrepresentation that ensured extremely careful consideration in the planning and application of the research methods used in this project. This discussion will consider such difficulties, which seem so inherent in the discipline on anthropology, and the measures that were taken to address them.

During my time in the field it was obvious that Lewis was a little optimistic when she wrote ‘[c]olonialism structured the relationship between anthropologists and non-Western peoples in the past’ (Lewis 1973:590) – the connection between the discipline of anthropology and colonialism is by no means forgotten, and it still structures these relationships. In the very early days of my research – before I had even approached the curators to arrange voluntary work I was sitting in the Trust’s library flicking through a pile of books that I hoped would help to frame some of my ideas. Uncle Albert, an Elder from Gippsland stood with the librarian and they laughed, exchanged bits of gossip and shared their weekend adventures before his attention turned to me, ‘Who’s this then?’ he asked Judy, gesturing towards me, offering me a wink. As Judy explained my interest in the Trust he wrinkled his nose, ‘Anthropologist?! Pah! I hate anthropologists! ...You’ll be after me bones, won’t ya?!’ Though all said with a smile on his face it was clear that wounds were still raw and I became
aware that declaring myself an ‘anthropology student’ in my British accent was an obstacle bigger than I had envisaged.

With an interest in the revival of cultural practices by Koorie artists, my research was also concerned with cultural loss. With an additional interest in the use of ethnographic material from the nineteenth century in this rejuvenation of practices, there was little point in trying to evade the fact that there was a very obvious connection between my anthropology of 2011, and the work of anthropologists such as Smythe or Murray-Black of the late eighteen-hundreds. The irony of my venture was something that often stopped me in my tracks – an anthropology student studying the effects and consequences of other anthropologists’ studies.

Anthropology’s roots in colonialism and the tragic consequences of this relationship were described by Levis-Strauss in 1966 as, ‘the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, while they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage and contaminated by disease they were unable to resist’ (Levis-Strauss 1966 as cited in Lewis 1973: 582). Though it was not only the physical plight of these people, but the misrepresentations of Indigenous Australians which became deeply inscribed into Western psyche as the ‘primitive other’. This institutionalised racism plays out as careless misrepresentation, the essentialism that groups a vast and diverse nation of peoples as one homogenised group of Aboriginal Australians, and as Langton describes ‘[t]he easiest and most ‘natural’ form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible’ (Langton 1993:24).

I was left with the task of designing a study that countered the traditional anthropological approaches which generated so much suspicion and fear of misrepresentation and misunderstanding – in short I was trying to construct a decolonising methodology – something anthropologist have been working towards for a long time, ‘...motivated by the critique of anthropology’s relationship to colonialism, anthropologists have addressed these kinds of issues for at least the last three decades’ (Lassiter 2005:4). As Margaret Mead ventured in 1969, ‘[a]nthropological research does not have subjects... We work with Indigenous informants in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect’ (Mead 1969:361). But it is difficult to establish such trust and respect when there is such a complex and difficult history to consider.

Though dysfunction and deeply entrenched social problems are a reality for many Indigenous communities, government acts of intervention and advocacy, often without asking for it, further strengthens the stereotype of what it means to be a contemporary Indigenous Australian. The research methods employed were designed to maximise the voice of my participants utilizing dialogic techniques – listening and recording interviews and contemplative conversations. Listening and assessing what subject matter was of importance to the Koorie community through my pre-field work.
when I first started volunteering at the Koorie Heritage Trust. Though I am still acutely aware this thesis is written in my own voice – experiences filtered through my eyes, ears, through my head, and out of my fingers on to this computer screen. My aim is to produce a final thesis that ‘more assertively attends to community concerns’ (Lassiter 2005:6).

For some though, the presence of my voice at all is problematic – as a non-Aboriginal woman how can I possibly research and represent an Aboriginal community? But, as Marcia Langton argues, the assumption that ‘being Aboriginal gives a ‘greater’ understanding... is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated Other... The assumption that all Aboriginals are alike and equally understand each other without regard for cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on...' (Langton 1994:95).

By striving to counter colonialist traditions and construct a collaborative study, it is also essential to consider the writing up of this research into the thesis it has become. The European tradition of writing and recording is problematic in itself when, as some state, ‘Aboriginality cannot be expressed in words as it is a feeling of one’s own spirituality. It is a sense of deep, proud cultural identity. Aboriginals live it and express it every day through art, language, humour, beliefs and familial and community relationships. Aboriginality forms the core basis of identity’ (Huggins 2001:2).

But the problem is twofold; not only does one have to describe an intangible experience of another person’s experience of being ‘Aboriginal’, one must also consider the limitations of one’s individual position as a researcher and writer:

[b]ecause personal narrative analysis is based on distinct epistemological and methodological presumptions, it produces a different type of knowledge than do many types of social-scientific and historical analysis...Personal narrative analysis, in contrast, builds from the individual and the personal. It gleans insight not only from subjective perceptions about social phenomena and events as revealed through participants’ stories, but more particularly through narrative forms experiencing, recalling, and making sense of social action... (Maynes et al 2008:9-11).

In conclusion, the first and most basic step was to acknowledge the limitations of this study, my position as the researcher, and of anthropology as a discipline, and to establish and maintain consultation and collaboration with participants throughout the course of my research and writing up, which has guided my objectives and research questions throughout.
Ethics

This research was carried out with approval from, and under guidance of, The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). I provided plain language statements in English to all of my participants, explaining clearly my research aims and how it was likely to affect them. My role as a student researcher was made explicit to my colleagues throughout the Trust, as I introduced myself as such. I worked with the Trust to ensure that they also found my research objectives to be ethically sound. The ethical guidelines provided by the University of Melbourne were followed and applied to my methodological approach as explained in more depth below.

Pseudonyms

Due to the relatively small size of my field site and the unique projects my participants were engaging in, my key participants decided they would prefer to be referred to in this thesis by their own names. Pseudonyms are used, however, for peripheral participants.

A note on style

As the voices of my participants have permeated this thesis from numerous sources I have chosen to italicise quotations not only from my own interviews and fieldnotes, but also from my participants own publications (Clark 2009; Couzens 2011; Keeler and Couzens 2010), and passages taken from texts and publications which use quotations from original interviews (Keeler and Couzens 2010; Reynolds 2005; Jackomos and Fowell 1991).

A note on images

This thesis is structured around the making of three different kinds of artefacts. While photographic images of these artworks would have undoubtedly lent another dimension to this thesis, I have decided to omit them. The procedure for gaining permissions to use such images required a necessary level of bureaucracy which deterred me from beginning the process until I had a very clear idea of which images I wished to use, where they would fit, and how they would contribute to the final thesis. As a work in progress I began to compensate for the absence of these visual aids but stitching together excerpts of my more descriptive ethnography and my own sketches (one of which is used on the title page of this thesis (fig. 1)). In the end I felt the prose, which provided the real substance of this thesis, superseded the need for images. However, there are photos of these objects, or similar objects, online which are accessible to the general public.

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A Clarification of Terms

Koorie, Aboriginal and Indigenous:

There are several terms which feature in this thesis whose meanings need to be clarified. Firstly I must be explicit in my use of the terms ‘Koorie’, ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ people. Koorie (also spelled Koori) is a general term that will be used throughout this thesis to refer to the artists and their culture and refers to Aboriginal people in south-east Australia which I have described in greater detail above. ‘Aboriginal’, meanwhile is used as a more general term to incorporate all groups of Indigenous people within Australia. ‘Indigenous’ – is a lesser used term, but it is used on occasion to refer to the original inhabitants of all of Australia both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In line with convention throughout this thesis the words ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’, and variations of these words, will be capitalized when referring Australia’s Indigenous or Aboriginal population, but not when referring to indigenous populations in general.

Language groups:

Each of my participants referred to themselves as Koorie and, on other occasions, Aboriginal, but these terms were often secondary to their identification with a particular language group. In the following chapters, as I introduce each of the artists, I will also indicate the language group to which they belong. Each language group is intrinsically tied to Country – the traditional land of their respective families (these are illustrated on the map found on page 86 [fig.2]). Many of the names of these language groups can be spelt in a number ways but for the purposes of this thesis I have taken lead from my colleagues at the KHT. When preparing for the publication of Meerreeng-an Here is My Country, they considered the inconsistencies in these spellings and how artists of the same language group sometimes preferred to use different spellings to one another; something Keeler and Couzens argue is reflective of the inadequacies of written English in attempting ‘spell sounds that do not exist in English’ (2010: 232). While some language groups have standardised their spelling rules in the process of the language reclamation, for others I have followed Keeler and Couzens in spelling the language groups’ name as my individual participants preferred.4

Art or Craft:

I use the terms artists, crafts people, cloak makers, weavers and practitioners interchangeably. While there are numerous debates which place craft and art in different camps, determined by creativity opposed to reproduction, an arbitrary scale of ‘authenticity’, which have emerged as theories of the creation of value have dominated discussions about Aboriginal art. I use each of these terms

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4 Examples among my key participants include a Gunnai man, which can also be spelt Gunai or Gunna/Kurnai, and a Mutti Mutti woman, which can be spelt Mutthi Mutthi. A more comprehensive list of alternative spellings can be found in Keeler and Couzens 2010 pp.232.
interchangeably depending the exact context, but the use of these terms certainly do not intend to assign authenticity, to one of other of my examples, nor distinguish what is ‘art’ and what is ‘craft’.

**Thesis outline**

In the following chapter, Chapter two, I will explore the processes involved in the making of two possum skin cloaks by a group of four Koorie women in 1999, an initiative which has inspired several such projects since. I will consider how, through engagement in the making of these cloaks the artists’ understandings of time, history, and the past informed their ideas of social memory, which is punctuated with reference to the timeless notion of dreamtime, and the *Old People* and ancestors who ‘transcend the illusionary veils of time’ as one of the four artists, Vicki Couzens, beautifully described.

Chapter three will tackle this huge and problematic theme of ‘knowledge’. Here I will explore how Maree Clarke’s came to ‘know’ how to craft a series of kangaroo tooth necklaces, one of which was homed at the Trust. Though interviews with both Maree and her friend and artistic collaborator, Len Tregonning, I will explore how they eventually achieve their ‘knowledge’ of how to craft these items, by travelling three different paths, or ‘ways of knowing’ (Harris 2007). This chapter also takes a reflexive and introverted turn when considering understandings of creating, transmitting, and interpreting knowledge as the anthropological pursuit.

Chapter four will introduce the body; the physical *making*, the movement, the rhythm, and the interaction of the body with the materials that are to be manipulated into objects of cultural significance. Here I will be looking at woven grass baskets and eel traps through my own experience as a novice weaver at a weaving workshop, and my research as a curatorial volunteer.

Finally I will draw this thesis together with reflections of the advantages and limitations of this project, critically addressing and my position as a researcher in this complex field site and the conclusions I reached.
Chapter Two

The Possum Skin Cloak’s Patchwork Time

*There’s lots of people who continue to adapt and look at old ways and old artefacts, and bridge the gap between an old world and new world as part of evolving, as people and culture. The cloak is testament to that.* (Treahna Hamm, as cited in Reynolds 2005:52)

On the second floor of the Koorie Heritage Trust, just to my right as I reached the top of the stairs and beyond of the reach of the Red Gum’s canopy, stood a large display cabinet. It was about five foot square and, as I faced it, it came level with my knees but then sloped gently up, reaching hip-height at the back. A stainless steel base supported a glass box perhaps eight inches deep; a custom made display case for one of the Trust’s treasured items.

Beneath the glass lay a rectangular patchwork of soft, pale leather with browns, reds, and blacks patterning its thirty panels with zigzags, diamonds, chevrons, and cross hatching. Some panels seemed to contain their own design: a series of white lines working their way through a solid curve of brown abruptly came to a halt as they met the next frame; numerous diamonds within diamonds in an ochre-red. Other panels contributed to bigger images where the patterns ran on to the next rectangle. The cloak did not lie flat on the black material lining the case, but was bolstered by the plush possum fur that backed the etched skins, which was visible at the edges where the pelts were cut square.

Through photographs, paintings, and written accounts it is evident that prior to European settlement, and during the early days of contact, all Aboriginal people of south eastern Australia wrapped up in possum skin cloaks to protect themselves from the wet, cold winters, to swaddle babies, to wrap and bury the dead; they would roll the cloaks up, or stretch them tight across their knees and beat the taught skin like a drum during ceremonial dances (Reynolds 2005:12-14, Presland 2010:74-7). And then, as Presland describes, during the warmer months the cloaks would be stowed away close to a winter camp.

These cloaks were highly prized, because of the skill and workmanship involved in making them, and because of the warmth they provide… as the weather improved and the group moved back towards the low country, the cloaks were rolled up and stored in a safe place close to a winter camp (Presland 2010:74).
From the 1820s, when the Aboriginal communities of south eastern Australia were forced to move on to mission stations, hunting practices ceased and so too did the practice of crafting these cloaks (www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/possum-skin-cloaks).

After several months on display Jodie and I had been given the job of removing the cloak from its pedestal by pivoting the heavy glass case on one edge of its stand, using a pair of suction cups to get a grip on the sheer glass surfaces. We removed the patch-worked cloak from beneath the case and folded it into a neat bundle so only the soft possum fur was exposed, protecting the stained skin-side from any damaging light or moisture. We placed it in a cardboard box and carried it though to its place on the shelves in the collections room, exchanging it for another of the Trust’s cloaks which would take its turn to be on show and to be admired by visitors.

In museums, the past is constantly brought forth into the present, and this was no different at the Trust where artefacts, documents, and images from the last two centuries were constantly pulled through time, into the exhibition space, to be juxtaposed with the modern surroundings of the King Street building and made sense of in the fleeting moment of the present. However, this possum skin cloak was one of several in the Trust’s collection which dated from no earlier than the early 1990s. This particular cloak was made in the late 1990s by Kelly Koumalatsos, a Wergaia/Wemba Wemba woman, who was among the first artists to revive the tradition of cloak making within the Koorie community (Keeler and Couzens 2010) since the practice ceased and Koorie men and women were forced to resort to wrapping themselves in government-issued blankets (Reynolds 2005:11-12). This chapter is concerned with the ways in which time, the past, and history are made sense of and experienced during the revival of such craft practices, and how these experiences of time inform a new kind of Koorie social memory.

Kelly Koumalatsos was among the few Koorie artists to engage in this craft in the 1990s, and it was around this time that the first major cloak-making project, Toolyon Koortakay, began. Toolyon Koortakay involved the careful replication of two nineteenth century cloaks by four Koorie women; Lee Darroch, Treahna Hamm, and sisters Vicki and Debra Couzens. The replications themselves are now housed at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

The story of the ‘Possum Skin Cloak Project’, as it was often called, became familiar to me as my time at the Trust went on. It was frequently referred to as one of the first major revival projects, and the catalyst which led to an even larger initiative where thirty-five (of the estimated thirty-eight) Koorie language groups in south eastern Australia each made a cloak inscribed with motifs and

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5 Wergaia and Wemba Wemba language groups are in north west Victoria. Wergaia Country is more central, around Yarriambiack Creek and Lake Hindmarsh, while Wemba Wemba Country is in the area of Swan Hill, along the Murray River.
6 Toolyon Koortakay can be translated as ‘the squaring of skin rugs’. Translated by Vicki Couzens, artist and Victorian Council of Aboriginal Languages (VCAL) employee.
images unique and significant to them. A nominated elder from each of the respective groups then donned the cloak for the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. The practice was revived throughout the Koorie community and continues today.

This chapter tells my take on the story of the Possum Skin Cloak Project and how time informs social memory. I learnt the story through the many discussions and conversations I engaged with at the Trust, as well as the numerous publications which depict the recreations. Two publications in particular permitted an insight into the artists’ perspective of these processes; *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak* was produced in concurrence with the Toolyoon Koortakay exhibition by the National Museum of Australia, the content of which was a collaboration between the four artists and curator Amanda Reynolds. *Meerreeng-An Here is My County*, meanwhile, was co-edited by Vicki Couzens. Both of these books are rich with interviews and quotations from all four of the artists.

### The Possum Skin Cloak Project

In 1999 Vicki Couzens, a Kirrare Wurrong/Gunditjmara woman, and Lee Darroch, a Yorta Yorta woman, took part in a printmaking workshop which was run by the Bunjilaka Centre - the Aboriginal Cultural Centre, housed within the Melbourne Museum. During the workshop they were invited behind the scenes to view the aged, stitched pelts of the two cloaks which were housed there; the Lake Condah Gunditjmara possum skin cloak collected in 1872 and the Maiden's Punt Yorta Yorta possum skin cloak collected in 1853 (www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/results?search=adv&ref=coll&collname=Tooloyn+Koortakay+collection).

As the artists recounted in numerous published interviews, the experience was profound and inspired them to embark on a project of cultural revival and regeneration. Vicki and her sister Debra were to recreate the Lake Condah cloak, while Lee and another Yorta Yorta artist, Treahna Hamm, tackled the Maiden’s Punt cloak. They decided to recreate the two cloaks exactly as their ancestors would have done; reproducing the patterns and motifs particular to their respective Countries, which were still just about visible on the worn and stained skins, by using the same tools and adopting the same techniques.

Their Ancestors would have spent days scraping the flesh from the inner side of the pelt with a mussel shell or a sharp stone implement. The pelts would then be cut into squares, stretched out on bark, and placed near the fire to tan and dry. Once dry, the skins would be incised with identifying patterns and motifs specific to the individual and her Country. The skins were then treated with ochre, charcoal, and fat, and sewn together with kangaroo sinew (Presland 2010:74; Gerritsen 2006:5).
Their intention to complete their task in an entirely ‘traditional’ way was short lived. It was soon discovered that it was illegal to kill possums in Australia. However, the project continued as they adapted techniques and improvised with modern tools.

As I learnt more and more about the revived tradition of cloak making, it became clear that this engagement with relics from the ‘pre-contact days’ revealed certain understandings about time; how these Koorie artists remembered and understood the past from their position in the present.

Time, it transpired, was experienced and understood in numerous ways. It was spoken about as a linear trajectory, with the past spanning out behind the artists as they progress forwards into the future. This expanse of time was bracketed into eras – eras which are characterised by events and dates which are arranged chronologically. This chronology was accessed through the textual, written tradition which dominates Western discourse; a discourse which, as contemporary Koorie women, they were inevitably engaged with and a part of, not least in the processes of archival research which proved to be central to the revival of this tradition.

Simultaneously, the past was also seen to emerge in the present, through the interactions with relics like the cloaks themselves, the motifs etched on to the skins which depict stories and places, and the actual places and land forms in Country. In these moments, it seemed that time and space would intersect and fuse into one, where the past came forth into the present in a very real way. As Vicki explained when describing seeing the 19th century cloaks for the first time,

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\text{[T]o see the cloak so close up – it was really awesome, it was really tangible. It was just like there was a loop to your Ancestors and you could almost hear them whispering} \quad (\text{Reynolds 2005:4}).
\]

Sometimes there were moments of intense emotion and sometimes revelatory moments of calm understanding - where they experienced the presence of, and communication with, their long dead Ancestors.

As the artists interacted with historical artefacts and reproduced motifs and patterns which were imbued with stories of cultural significance, time appeared to ‘take on flesh’ and they were able to communicate with their Ancestors, despite the long chronological stretch between ‘now’ and ‘then’.

This chapter explores further how each of these ways time was experienced and understood, but first I must make explicit what I mean by ‘time’ in this context.
Whose time is it anyway?

During an interview Vicki Couzens spoke of when she came into contact with the Lake Condah Gunditjmara cloak for the first time:

*It seemed, in that moment, that the Old People were standing there beside and around us. I felt as if the illusionary veils of time, space and place had thinned, dissipated and I could reach through and feel them, touch and see the Old People. It was a profound spiritual experience* (Couzens 2011).

Vicki was not alone in experiencing a connection to her ancestors and their transcendence through time and space. Her fellow cloak makers describe similar occurrences. While Vicki’s articulate description of her experience seems to suggest that time is in some way an ‘illusion’, subsequent conversations managed to elucidate what at first seemed to be a rather radical statement; Vicki was not necessarily suggesting that is was not time itself that is illusionary, but the modern linear, unitary time, which has dominated European discourse since the Enlightenment (Fabian 1983; O’Shaughnessy 2009; Goodwin-Hawkins 2012).

While Vicki does not go so far as to discuss the ramifications that this temporal model might have had upon her and her Ancestors, Fabian does. He eloquently illustrates the relationship between Enlightenment thought, ideas of evolutionism, and how this was used to justify the colonial project7, which saw all living societies as being ‘irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time – some upstream, some downstream’ (Fabian 1983:12).

So, even if these are just ‘ideas’ of time, Fabian demonstrates ‘that this kind of temporal reasoning can be ideologically invasive’ (O’Shaughnessy 2009:6) and can, and indeed has, become inherent in the way cultures operates, as ‘[t]ime becomes a lens through which behaviours, self and structure are mediated and performed’ (*ibid*: 6). Needless to say, Vicki’s experience unsettles a way of thinking about time – a way of thinking that, in the advent of colonialism, has become another form of hegemonic power.

As Castoriadis succinctly articulates, when thinking about anything, in this case time, we are faced with an ‘unsurmountable division’ between ‘[t]ime for us – or for some subject’ as we experience it, and ‘[t]ime in or of the world’ – objective time (1991:38). This chapter is not concerned with ‘objective’ time. My agenda is not to ponder the metaphysics of time, or a noumenal time set apart from human perception - that task can be left to the philosophers - it is the *thinking* about time that is of interest here. Time, of course, has been *thought* about by philosophers, mathematicians,

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7 Fabian’s larger project was to discuss how the discipline of anthropology is also closely affiliated with this conception of time and ideas of progress, improvement and development.
sociologists, and anthropologists for as long as the respective disciplines have existed, and anthropologists and sociologists have often adopted philosophical approaches to make sense of different peoples’ time reckoning. This trend stemmed from the Durkheimian project of not only trying to ‘clarify the empirical questions as to how, through collective representations, human beings have sought to codify time, but… also raising the much more problematic issue of how it comes about that time exists to be codified’ (Gell 1992:6), a task which I believe, following Gell, is beyond the scope of anthropology and sociology. I am not concerned with what time ‘is’, but the ‘shape, regularity and rhythm’ these artists invoke as they engage in these artistic ventures (James and Mills 2005:5).

In this chapter I am interested in how time is understood and made sense of from the very human, grounded positions of the artist and staff at the Koorie Heritage Trust, and how this is related to social memory in the post-colonial context.

**Linear Time**

During my time volunteering with staff and artists at the Trust, in amongst the optimistic rhetoric of cultural strength and continuity, I detected a real trepidation of loss, distance, and severance from the past. There was a definite fear of forgetting and losing hold of the threads of culture the Trust and the rest of the Koorie community had clasped onto, as the rest of their cultural tapestry had been unravelled and unpicked through the colonial process. Then this depressed mood was contradicted by an optimism which was often related to me with great gusto and defiance as the artists explained that the perceived temporal distances between their ancestors and today were arbitrary.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, museums bring things from the past into the present – pulling historical items out from the archives, and into the public space of the gallery. Of course, one does not have to visit a museum to experience the past in the present, to see ‘then emerging now’ (Goodwin-Hawkins 2012:13). Each space we occupy existed before we occupied it, and there are nearly always relics of what was there before: the very thing the discipline of archaeology is interested in.

In 1998, however, the Yorta Yorta community were told unequivocally by the Australian courts that ‘the tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of…traditional customs’ in the rejection of a Native Title claim. This idea that the past is behind us, as we ‘stride ever “forwards”’ (Goodwin-Hawkins 2012:14) making progress, the space where we have just been recoils

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backwards, and as it recedes it takes with it everything which is not recorded in a way recognised and legitimised by the ‘hegemonic language’ (Wolfe 1991:198).

Wolfe uses the phrase ‘hegemonic language’ to describe the limiting colonial framework within which colonised people are represented – a framework they themselves must work within if they are ever to represent themselves. Wolfe’s essay is concerned with the term ‘dreamtime’ and how complex cosmologies from all over Australia have been reduced to the single phrase ‘dreamtime’. Dreamtime was coined in the late nineteenth century after the clumsily translation of a word of the Arunta people of Central Australia, which was used to describe both the literal state of dreaming and one’s ancestors. However, this term has now been harnessed and utilized by many Aboriginal groups as a means of communicating.

The idea of this hegemonic language could be extended to the body of literature and museum collections which were all constructed through the kind of framework Wolfe describes, but in this case it is not just misrepresentation but the absence of any representation at all which is the problem; a gaping lacuna which effectively ‘wrote’ much of Koorie culture out of history.

Between the mid to late nineteenth century and the late 1960s, in both the academic sphere and that of the art world, Koorie cultural practices were effectively written out of history as they no longer reflected Western ideas of authentic Aboriginal culture (Morphy 1995; Kleinert 2000b:77). There was very little acknowledgment of the production of any Koorie art until, as Kleinert says, the ‘emergence of a contemporary Koori[e] art movement in the 1970s … a gap which implies that traditional Aboriginal culture in the region died out, then re-emerged as if from a cultural vacuum’ (2000:78).

The numerous conversations I had within the Trust, with curators, artists, management, and exhibition staff, seemed to reveal that there were three ‘eras’, for want of a better term, of Koorie history: ‘pre-contact’, ‘mission-life’, and the present day. During my numerous trips to the collection store the Collections staff clearly differentiated between the few heavy clubs, boomerangs, and coolamons9 with aged patinas, and the brittle woven bags as ‘pre-contact’ artefacts, and the numerous examples of painted wooden boomerangs, engraved emu eggs, and decorated grass baskets, which were crafted for the tourist trade throughout the twentieth century, as either examples of work produced during life on the Missions, or modern interpretations of the pre-contact artefacts.

The online catalogue which was used to keep a careful record of all of these items employed terms such as ‘pre-contact’, ‘contact history’, or ‘contemporary issues’ as ‘tags’ to categorise each of the objects. My colleagues were emphatic that this difference was not an assessment of ‘authenticity’, but

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9 A coolamon is a carrying vessel varying in shape but often a long oval, with curved sides. They can be made of various materials – there are examples of carved wooden coolamons in the Koorie Heritage Trust’s collections, as well as the woven ones we are considering here.
an acknowledgment of the very different contexts within which items from each category were produced.

No-one explicitly identified these periods as ‘eras’ of time. In fact, in contrast to Treahna Hamm’s distinction between the old and new worlds (the opening quote of this chapter), there was an articulated frustration with the popular ‘now’ and ‘then’ dichotomy which so often frames contemporary, urban Koorie people as separate from their blacker, more ‘Aboriginal’, more ‘authentic’ Ancestors. However, these time frames are also often used to highlight the continuity of Koorie culture – a defiant thread weaving through history, perhaps lost and obscured by the rest of the tapestry at some points, but then emerging in the present, still intact; still weaving, carving, and etching possum skins. The three eras through which this thread has run are explained in more detail below.

Firstly, there is the pre-contact or pre-invasion era - a period spanning tens of thousands of years, when Aboriginal cultures sustained themselves and their environment, living according to the lore of their own Country, when social structure, inter-tribal warfare, were guided by a religious relationship with the land, each group’s particular totems, and their Ancestors (Presland 2010). They would speak and sing in their distinct language, and create art works with markings and motifs particular to their respective language group. Before the invasion it is understood there were approximately thirty-eight language or cultural groups across Victoria and New South Wales (Keeler and Couzens 2010:3).

The second of these ‘eras’ is one of extreme change. This is the period after the European invasion when the lives of the Aboriginal people who had inhabited Australia for at least fifty thousand years (Keeler and Couzens 2010), began to be systematically broken down by the newcomers, and they were forced to live on Mission Stations. For the region now known as Victoria this began in 1835, when the first settlement was built along the Murray River (Presland 2010:11). Chris and Vicki described this transformation in the introduction to the Trust’s 2010 publication *Meerreeng-An Here Is My Country*:

Systematic dispossession of land forced Aboriginal people from their Country. Thousands of Aboriginal lives were lost in the ensuing warfare and massacres and through introduced diseases… They endured prohibitive and genocide management policies including the removal of children, the separation of families, the regulations of marriages, and the denial of the right to speak their own language, perform traditional ceremony or maintain traditional beliefs. Invasive scrutiny and control of their daily lives conspired to annihilate or assimilate Aboriginal communities (Keeler and Couzens 2010:4).

The staff of the Trust and the artists all seemed to concur that during this systematic destruction of their way of life – the prohibition of speaking of language, conducting ceremonies, rituals, and
traditional craft practices – much knowledge of how to do things was hushed, and in some cases silenced completely. During the early days of this ‘era’ European anthropologists scribed notes describing cultural traits and characteristics, sketched and painted depictions of the people and their surroundings, took photographs, and translated a small amount of language\textsuperscript{10}. It seemed, to the KHT staff, that Europeans had effectively stagnated many bodily practices into written words, a limited array of material artefacts and two dimensional visual representations, locked away in institutions, inaccessible to the Koorie community. Once the assimilation practices had taken hold, and many traditional practices ceased, interest in the Koorie community as ‘authentic’ Aboriginal people also came to an end leading to the popular perception among the European population that Koorie culture was dead.

The third era is most accurately characterised by the artists’ and other community members’ attempts to revive cultural practices, beginning in earnest in the 1970s and 1990s, and emerging from a more general contemporary Koorie art movement which began as early as the 1960s (Morphy 1998; Kleinert 2000b). It was at this time that artists began to use all that was at their disposal to reclaim skills and art practices that had been forgotten. This included the use of the documents, paintings, and photographs which the white Australians stowed away in museums and archives in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

As anthropologist Howard Morphy writes:

\begin{quote}
[s]ince the 1960s the position of Aborigines in southeast Australia has changed in ways that have brought continuities with the past back into the open. Kooris have reconnected themselves to their history… continuities in craft production over time have... been recognized (Morphy 1998:321).
\end{quote}

Possum skin cloak making, however, was not one of the crafts which had continued under the radar of the assimilation policies and the knowledge which survived within the community was minimal. ‘So we started asking questions of our Elders, we started reading up, we started going to the museum and asking more and more questions…’ Lee explains in the pages of \textit{Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak} (Reynolds 2005:34).

The sources the artists used could be characterized as belonging to the second era I have identified, when, for a few short decades, an effort was made to describe and record Koorie culture. In an attempt

\textsuperscript{10} For example, James Dawson’s volume \textit{Australian Aborigines: The languages and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the western district of Victoria, Australia} first published in 1881 (Dawson 2010), or Robert Brough Smyth’s book, \textit{The aborigines of Victoria: with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania} (1878). In addition, \textit{Sun Pictures of Victoria: The Fauchery-Daintree Collection, 1858} - a collection of photographs taken by photographers, Frenchman Antoine Fauchery and Englishman Richard Daintree (www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/early-photographs-gold/). This volume has been more recently reproduced and annotated by Dianne Reilly and Jennifer Carew (Reilly and Carew 1983).
to familiarise myself with the texts and images the artists had used, I approached the Trust’s librarian, Judy. As I sat in the library, Judy busied herself rummaging amongst the shelves, unlocking the rare books cabinet and depositing in front of me a couple of older looking volumes with fragile spines, and an armful of smaller, more recent publications with glossy covers.

One of the larger books, published in 1983, was entitled “Sun Pictures of Victoria” - a collection of photographs from the mid-nineteen century collated by Antoine Fauchery, a photographer, and Richard Daintree, a geographer (Reilly and Carew 1983:1-2). One photograph in particular grabbed my attention. It was a black and white image depicting five Koorie men standing in a line. Each of them cocooned within their possum skin cloaks which come right up to the nape of their necks, their bearded faces emerging from the fur and looking out towards the camera. From within the folds of the fur their left arms cradles a parrying shield11 which protrudes to the height of their heads – the man to the far left of the image also carries a club. At their feet are six more men, one perhaps only a teenager, sat cross legged, with grey blankets – also known as ‘mission blankets’ – pulled around their shoulders. The black and white image seemed to capture the moment between ‘pre-contact’ and ‘post-contact’, just before possum skin cloaks became something emblematic of the past and were relegated to the collection stores of museums.

The eras I have crudely outlined represent pivotal moments of recent Koorie history and a chronology that seemed to be extremely important to the artist, as they tried to reconcile the ‘then’ and ‘now’. Crucially the second era depicted here can be characterised by the absence of any significant written record of Koorie life; a gap in history which has effectively written Koorie population out of the common imagination.

As cultural revival has progressed it has not only been in defiance of this recorded history, but also in an attempt to fill that lacuna, to fill the gap and rewrite history without this cultural vacuum.

As we have seen previously the past seems to emerge in the present in the form of relics and landforms, but it is almost as if here the artists and curators are positioning artworks and writing produced in the present back into the past – to fill a lacuna and strengthen the weave of the Koorie cultural tapestry.

The possum skin cloaks are almost being used to put the ‘present’ back into the ‘past’ - when talking about the cumulative information which is stored in books, articles, and documents it is often referred to as a ‘body’ of knowledge. The idea that this body is incomplete suggests that it cannot function correctly – it is missing an organ.

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11 A parrying shield is a long narrow shield which was used to protect the length of the body. The front of the shield is shaped like a triangular prism.
Patchwork Time

It appears that these artists’ initial motivation to recreate the two nineteenth century cloaks partially sprung from a desire to correct existing and prevalent misrepresentations of the Koorie culture through the hegemonic tradition of recording the past in a ‘history’: as a chronology of events bracketed into eras and spaced through time along a line which stretches back towards their Ancestors. However, Vicki argues that this process is about far more than a political statement, or a desire to set the record straight, it was a matter of connection and engagement with the Old People. As she explained:

[“their message, our story, is to return the cloaks to our People, to reclaim, regenerate, revitalise and remember. To remember what those cloaks mean to us and tell the stories of our People and Country” (Couzens 2011).]

The key motivation for this project was to establish a connection with their culture and Country. It was through the interaction with both the older cloaks and in the making of the new ones that these artists were able to ‘remember’ and access such stories:

“It’s the key to accessing the past – to other knowledge that’s locked within us. I believe we have ancestral memories... Aboriginal culture is perceived as dots and x-ray paintings and people who are really black. Our spirits live on – that’s who we are. The skin colour might fade or whatever, but it’s still there strong and living, and this is just keeping it going, its bringing it through to now, and carrying it forward and that’s what’s important” (Vicki Couzens as cited in Reynolds 2005:49)

Vicki tells us of how she was able to access her ‘ancestral memories’ though her engagement with the possum skin cloaks. It appears that each of the cloak makers experienced something similar, which was often described as moments when the distance between ‘then’ and ‘now’ disappeared, and they were able to engage and communicate with their Ancestors.

“They pulled the Lake Condah cloak out of its box...we were right next to it...and then the whole room just burst out crying... It was a really strong emotion coming from the cloak itself that the Old Ones were right there and everyone felt it” (Lee Darroch as cited in Reynolds 2005:2).

In these moments, Bakhtin explains, ‘[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes ... visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time.’ (Bakhtin 1981:84).

Bakhtin termed this fusing of time and space as a ‘chronotope’ – literally meaning time-space. While Bakhtin developed this term from Einstein’s physics for the purposes of literary analysis, it is also an extremely useful tool to make sense of the ways in which through landscape (Country), the cloaks...
themselves, and the motifs with which they are adorned each prove to be points of ‘space’ where time ‘becomes visible’ (*ibid*). Bender and Wellberry, who develop Bakhtin’s term, succinctly describe chronotypes as ‘models or patterns, through which time assumes practical or conceptual significance’ (1991:4).

As illustrated by the above quotations, when the artists came into contact with the physical cloaks they experienced a direct link to the past and to their Ancestors. It is through these snapshots of narrative that these experiences of ‘temporality… [are] brought into language’12 (Goodwin-Hawkins 2012:14), and into a format accessible to me and thus analysis. As Goodwin-Hawkins considers, this is essentially a process of narrative analysis, and within narratives it is possible to identify ‘metaphorical patterns of shapes’ (2012:14) which can prove helpful in illustrating these ways of making sense of time. The ‘time line’ which is so often used to characterise the popular conception of time I have already illustrated is such a metaphorical shape. While Goodwin-Hawkins develops an idea of weaving time to describe the way the past appears in the present in post-industrial village in the north of England, I propose the shapely metaphor of *patchwork time* to describe the way time was understood and experienced by these Koorie artists.

The cloak is a series of etched pelts which each tell a story and are part of a bigger complex – they symbolise totems, land forms, creation stories, and cumulatively, Country. Country is all encompassing and wraps right around – the artists move *through* their Country, the hills and river tributaries that have made up the landscape for centuries. As they wrap the cloaks around them, they wrap Country around them too. As the fabric of the cloak buckles, ‘folds and pleats’, so too does time ‘so what seems far away actually comes nearer’ (Harris 2007:16). As the cloaks are pulled tightly up against the artists’ skin, they can touch different parts of time.

A patchwork might evoke images of broken or fragmented scraps of time cobbled together to form a whole – this is not the image I am trying to conjure. Instead the patchwork is a series of sites, land forms, objects, images, or even stories all connected to and part of the same fabric or past. When the Koorie artists engage with these patches of time, they are able to ‘feel’ and communicate with their Ancestors in the past. All these patches of time exist concurrently; they are just not always accessible.

As the cloak makers engaged and created the motifs and patterns which symbolise, sometimes quite abstractly, totems and land forms, they managed to achieve an understanding,

> So it came back to me what the designs meant but that was definitely a really spiritual thing, it didn’t happen quickly, it happened over the time of making it. But often burning into the wee hours of the night, I realised what it meant. And I realised that it was the way of making

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12 As I have already discussed, language, especially English, can be problematic when considering a postcolonial context, but equally so it is a current and powerful vehicle of expression for the Koorie artists’ who are very much conscious and aware of the framework they have had to submit to.
sure that the meaning wasn’t lost. They passed it on so that we could say pretty much confidently when it was finished, this is what it means, this is what it always meant and that we could hand that on to the next generations (Lee Darroch as cited in Reynolds 2005:42).

Keith Basso used chronotypes to examine how the stories of the Western Apache were connected to land forms. These stories are imbued with important moral guidelines, and are closely associated with their surrounding landscape. These features of the landscape are chronotopes: a point where the moral teachings of their ancestors are accessible simply through looking at, or being close to, them. These forms of the land also become emblematic of the community itself. These stories and moral teachings were remembered as his informants moved through their landscape and came across land forms associated with them. Basso uses Bakhtin to illuminate this:

[chronotopes are] points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people…Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as force operating to shape its members images of themselves (Bakhtin 1981 in Basso 1984:44-45).

This is certainly the case for the possum skin cloaks and the motifs and images with which they were incised.

As the four cloak makers explained, The Old People continued to live and guide their descendants living today and, during the making of the cloaks, every now and then their presence was felt with such potency the four artists were overcome with emotion or stillness. In these moments they gained a sense of clarity and comprehension of the importance and meaning of the motifs and maps etched into the nineteenth century cloaks, and the significance of the cloaks as a whole.

Place, it seems, takes precedent over time. As Koorie ontology tells us, time was created through transformation of ancestral beings into place. These places, or these representations of them, are forever a mnemonic of that event. These artists learn about their ancestral past by engaging with representations of the landscape, as well as visiting sites of significance in their respective Countries. As Morphy observed during his field work with the Yolngu of Arnhem Land:

[p]eople learn about ancestral past simply by moving through the landscape. The knowledge they acquire reflects an active relationship between the ancestral past and the land itself, not only does landscape change but ancestral presence intervenes to influence human action (1995:204).
These artists’ generate and experience time through interactions with their Ancestors which challenge more conventional, linear conceptions of time. It is through these new interactions, which only came about with the revival of cloak making, that these artists are generating a new kind of social memory. As Lee explained, through the experience of being close to the old cloaks, and to touching, stitching, and burning the motifs and patterns into the skins of the recreations, she was able to access a new dimension to of the past, which inevitably informed the way she remembered and conceptualised her own Koorie culture.

Conclusions

As I stated at the start of this chapter I am not interested in ‘objective’ time or how time comes to exist to be experienced ‘subjectively’, I am interested in the experiences themselves.

Time is experienced and conceptualised in a multitude of ways ‘both within and between cultures’, a plurality which, as I have explored, can be described as ‘chronotypes’ (Goodwin-Hawkins 2012:14). Chronotypes are ‘models or patterns, through which time assumes practical or conceptual significance’ (Bender and Wellberry 1991:4).

Through the artists’ narratives, I was able to gain access as to how they express their experiences of time. Transcribing experiences into the written word is notoriously difficult, but from these narratives it is possible to identify metaphorical shapes which assist in this illustration.

The cloak makers’ and the Trust’s staff’s narratives revealed two such ‘shapes of time’, although there were undoubtedly more at play which were not brought to light through interviews and discussions. Firstly, was the familiar linear time-line which positions the artists at one end and their Ancestors in the far temporal distance, and secondly a kind of ‘patchwork time’. These two shapes exist and are experienced simultaneously.

‘Patchwork time’ emerged from a very specific set of circumstance which unfolded when the artists first came into contact with the only two Victorian possum skins cloaks made prior to the 1990s, known to exist in Australia. Through interactions with these objects the artists were able to communicate and learn from their Ancestors.

‘Patchwork time’ illustrates how the past can be accessed through a multitude of artefacts, images and land forms which occupy the artists live-in-world. Time, instead of stretching back along a temporal line, surrounds and wraps around the artists, much like the cloak.

This new set of experiences transformed how the cloak makers ‘remembered’ and conceptualised their cultural history. Through their widely syndicated narratives in publications, galleries and
conversation, Koorie ‘social memory’ has changed. Instead of having to negotiate the ‘breaks in the knowledge’, as another artist describes, which interrupt the terrain of the ‘time-line’ which spans the long temporal distance between ‘now’ and ‘then’, the past can be accessed through the craft practice which utilises significant materials and represents significant places.

This connection is understood to be a kind of ‘Ancestral knowledge’. This contributes to a complex of ‘know-how’ which culminates in the skill set and understanding required to recreate these artefacts. The following chapter will explore how, in turn, through the revival of a different kind of craft, knowledge has been made sense of and how this also informs a new kind of Koorie social memory.
Chapter Three

The generation of knowledge / The generations of knowing

Thung-ung Coorang: Kangaroo Teeth

Seventy-five kangaroo incisor teeth were splayed in an almost perfect circle. They were each around two inches long, tinged with yellow at the root and came to a sharp angled point. The roots were neatly bound with sinew, which also held in place small loops of ochre stained kangaroo leather, connecting them to a larger band of hide which had also been basted in ochre to give it the same deep reddish-brown colour. The symmetry and intricacy intrigued me as I flicked through the glossy pages of Trust’s newest publication, Meerreeng-An Here is My Country. The necklace had been recently showcased in an exhibition which accompanied the book’s launch in June 2010, and it also dominated the front page of the Koorie artist’s quarterly newsletter, No Dots Down Here. It was a familiar image.

In 2008 Maree Clarke, a prominent Koorie artists and employee at the Trust, crafted two of these large necklaces, plus a smaller version, and two headbands. This came fifteen years after she first came across a photograph dating back to 1840 which depicted a Koorie woman wearing such a necklace. When Maree had finally collected enough teeth, salvaged from kangaroo carcasses she found on the side of the road, and she had collated all the information on kangaroo teeth necklaces she could find, she began her work.

As Maree manipulated this intricate necklace from teeth, sinew, and skin, she acquired and practiced a kind of ‘know-how’ which, over the course of my time in the field, had numerous labels attached to it by curators, academics, and the artists themselves; Indigenous knowledge, ancestral knowledge, cultural knowledge, local knowledge, practical knowledge, embodied knowledge. Here I adopt Harris’s use of the phrase ‘ways of knowing’, describing the multiple pathways to knowledge which involves the movement of a person from one context to another. This stress on

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13 A discussion of ‘knowledge’ in this context could continue along a several paths, one of the more compelling and relevant would be a consideration of the ‘Indigenous Knowledge’ (IK) model developed by D.M. Warren (in Sillitoe 1998). This concept of ‘IK’ emerged from discussions of development and considered in terms of ecology and the environment. Some of the key critiques of IK are that it creates an immediate dichotomy between Indigenous and Western/scientific knowledge and then; ‘primitive’: modern, local: global, closed: open, experiential: analytical. As Agrawal points out in his critique of IK, the creation of these two categories ‘ultimately rests on the possibility that a small and finite number of characteristics can define the elements contained within [them]’ - this, he argues, fails on substantive, methodological and contextual grounds (1995). Furthermore Indigenous knowledge is often thought of as synonymous to traditional knowledge, which is problematic when one is working with a modern, urban group of artists, as I was. As I go on to explore, my participants certainly claim to possess a kind of ‘indigenous knowledge’ but it is something they possess as modern Aboriginal Australians living in an urban setting.
movement and generation of knowledge (opposed to the reception of a ‘body’ of knowledge by a passive recipient) aptly described the way in which Koorie artists were seen to adapt and improvise their techniques – forging new paths to knowledge, in an effort to revive and rejuvenate long-lost craft practices.

Throughout my time in the field it became apparent that the artists seemed to begin their journeys to ‘knowledge’ from one of at least three different points: archival research, which involved the careful perusal of texts, photographs, paintings, and sketches; what I will term ‘community learning’ – which includes apprenticeship learning and ‘Deep Listening’, which will be elaborated on in due course; and ‘Ancestral knowledge’, which was experienced as a transcendence of an external knowledge, or an awakening of an innate understanding or intuition within oneself.

This chapter will explore how through these sometimes apparently fractured moments of learning, along improvised terrain, a ‘knowledge’ emerges which is, by all accounts, distinctly ‘Koorie’. As this new knowledge was accumulated and generated, and the tangible product was exhibited and celebrated, discussions about Koorie history and the past emerged amongst the artists and employees at the Trust. I was forced to consider the relationship between the artists’ understandings of knowledge, and how the Koorie community remember and conceptualize the past.

However, first I must set the parameters for how such a broad, all-encompassing term was used and understood by my participants, and how it will be used as an analytic tool in the course of this chapter.

The Knowledge Question

Grappling the concept of ‘knowledge’ opens up a can of writhing worms or, as Hansen describes it, the ‘hornets’ nest of philosophers and psychologists who have been wrangling about the question “what is knowledge” for centuries’ (1982:190). It is a huge term imbued with all sorts of connotations, and is undoubtedly the purpose of all scholarly endeavor – to create knowledge. Perhaps more fundamentally, as Crick identified, many anthropologists have also recognized it as central to the concept of culture, when culture is ‘a process of acquiring and displaying knowledge – of rules, values, and beliefs’ (1982:287), and thus anthropology is concerned with producing knowledge about the production of knowledge. After all, ‘[l]earning is at the very core of the discipline of anthropology and the concept of culture…’ (Hansen 1982:189).

So, it appears that knowledge is absolutely central to culture, but this tells us virtually nothing about what knowledge actually ‘is’. Fabian approaches this problem by taking his definition back to the most basic of levels; opposing ‘knowledge’ to ‘ignorance’. While this is certainly a truism, it is effectively just telling us what knowledge is not, not what it is. Ingold adds to this, differentiating
‘information’ and ‘knowledge’, as ‘information in itself, is not knowledge, we do not become any more knowledgeable through its accumulation’ (Ingold 2000:12).

A more useful definition comes from Berger and Luckman when dealing with the sociology of knowledge, when ‘knowledge is the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess certain characteristics’ (Berger and Luckman 1971 in Harris 2007:5). Balancing this definition on a ‘certainty’ permits a degree of subjectivity of what knowledge is. Different individuals and groups of people possess certainty of different phenomenon being real. Thus, phenomena that my participants experienced during the processes of making, but I did not experience personally and I cannot rationalise, are not relegated to a ‘belief’.

This, however, does raise some questions about the creation of ‘anthropological knowledge’, its subjective nature, and the layers of interpretation and representation of different kinds of ‘knowledge’ it involves.

**Knowledge and Anthropology**

As I listened to Maree speak of the Nineteenth century ethnographies she had scoured and the photographs she had studied, and I, as an anthropology student, was writing about her doing so, I became acutely aware of an irony. It was becoming abundantly clear that there was a necessity for reflection on the layers upon layers of interpreting, recording, and ‘creating knowledge’ which is at the very core of anthropology and this thesis.

As my writing turned experience into ‘anthropological knowledge’, I was forced to consider whose knowledge was whose, as I scribed field notes about my understanding of the artists understanding of how they know. As Fabian articulates so well, ultimately all an anthropologist can achieve is writing about ‘what we know about how they know what they know’ (Fabian 2012:443).

In this pursuit, however, it is clear that in writing up the knowledge of these Koorie artists I am not merely reproducing it but rather ‘transmuting it into an entirely different logical form’ (Pálsson1994:921) – transmuting experience into expression. As Bloch exclaims ‘it is one thing to participate in face-to-face interaction and to engage in fieldwork and quite another, perhaps, to “write it up”’ (emphasis original 1991:193). Pálsson goes on to ask ‘[h]ow can we then textualize the knowledge we acquire in the field without – in the process –fundamentally distorting both its character and the manner in which it was acquired?’ (Pálsson 1994:921).

While the problem of transposing experience and tacit knowledge into the written word is inevitably fraught with difficulty, it does not make this pursuit any less valuable. By overtly acknowledging my
subjective, fallible position and striving to conduct the most methodologically sound field research, one can still obtain valuable insights.

The power relations that have stifled, controlled, and manipulated knowledge and information are fundamental to this chapter. While I strive to acknowledge and unpick some of these relationships, the primary concern of this thesis is to consider how these artists understand their processes of knowledge acquisition, and to present their explanations of what Indigenous knowledge is and how it works in a contemporary urban setting rather than recounting a history which has been primarily written and told by Europeans\textsuperscript{14}. To give a full and thorough account of the historic power relations which inform the political, social, religious, economic, and environmental lives of these artists is beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis. These artists are aware and engaged in the power tensions and structures which restrict and enable their work, and this chapter engages specifically with the experiences they identified.

This chapter explores how \textit{I understand}, how Maree and others seem to \textit{understand} ‘knowledge’, and how they appear to acquire it, through three ‘ways of knowing’, or ‘paths to knowledge’ (Harris 2007); archival research, community learning and Ancestral knowledge. Firstly, though, I must illustrate the processes involved in the making of Maree’s kangaroo tooth necklace.

\textbf{Getting to know the know-how and know-what: Making the necklace}

The kangaroo tooth necklace was kept in the collections store, right in the belly of the building, but it was looked after by the collections team who were tucked away at the back of the library. The library housed thousands\textsuperscript{15} of both published and unpublished books, documents, maps, pamphlets, posters, video cassettes, CDs, and DVDs, which together compiled a portfolio of information about the Koorie community, written and composed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards by Indigenous Elders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, sociologists, botanists, biologists, museums curators, art historians, photographers, linguists, among many more. This vast amount of information was open to community members at their convenience, and to other interested parties by appointment with the librarian, Helen.

\textsuperscript{14} Of course non-Indigenous historians, like anthropologists, are keenly aware of their position as a product of an European academic tradition, and no matter how sympathetic they might be to Aboriginal people’s plight, they are not Aboriginal themselves so will never succeed in telling an Aboriginal History. A heated debate emerged about how best to gage a fair and accurate historical account of the early years of European settlement. Some historians who have discussed this, are Macintyre’s \textit{History Wars} (2003), Attwood’s \textit{Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History}; and perhaps less sympathetic and most provocatively, Keith Windshuttle’s \textit{The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One, Van Diemen’s Land 1803 – 1847} (2002).

\textsuperscript{15} An estimated 6000, according to the KHT’s website. www.koorieheritagetrust.com/collections/library
Helen sat to the right as you entered the room, behind the large old desk which had once belonged to Ron Caston, one of the founding members of the Trust, from his days as a QC at the Aboriginal Legal Service. Behind her were several rows of books which were catalogued by a series of coloured dots to denote the topic or theme. The space between the bookshelves housed a photocopier, a large table for library users, and three old Macintosh computers which provided access to the collection catalogue. The last row of shelves shielded the collection staffs’ small office space from the more public area of the library. Five desks were dotted around the perimeter of the room, and a soft red arm chair was pushed up against the shelf that formed the office’s internal wall. The space was bright from the surrounding windows which allowed a view onto the blank walls of the neighbouring buildings and, if you looked down at an uncomfortable angle, the passers-by, many of whom were staff from the various court houses on the next block. The two senior curators, the curator, the curatorial cadet, contract workers and volunteers, myself included, occupied these seats.

In the shelves neighbouring the rare books cabinet were records of contemporary artists’ recent revival projects too. The making of Maree’s kangaroo tooth necklace was one of them. There were photographs, magazine clippings, DVDs, the KHT’s publications, and a number of theses, including Maree’s own.

One of the desks in the collections’ office was occupied by Jeff, who was a contract worker. From time to time Jeff was employed to complete projects as diverse as painting the walls of the Moogji Lounge, hanging paintings, negotiating the practicalities of displaying artifacts, and, on this occasion, editing video footage for the Koorie Heritage Trust’s page on the Culture Victoria website (www.cv.vic.gov.au).

I had heard about the existence of this video, but had never actually seen it. It told the story of the making of Maree’s kangaroo tooth necklace – a project which had become quite famous within the circles of the Koorie community and local museum workers. Jeff slipped the DVD into his computer and we huddled round to watch. Jodie, who sat next to me, conducted the interview with Maree on this recording and was excited to review her work from a couple of years before. We were transported into Maree’s back garden.

On a round glass table are two rectangular boxes full of Kangaroo teeth and a red plastic bowl full of hot soapy water. She arranges the teeth into three rows, lining them up according to their size, her hand hovering for a moment while she deliberates where each tooth belongs. By way of explanation for the viewer she retrieves a kangaroo jaw from out of shot and demonstrates where the tooth would have fitted. Only the two lower incisor teeth from each Kangaroo can be used. Maree, her friend Len Tregonning, and her niece and nephew would spend weekends collecting these teeth from kangaroos found dead along the roads around Mildura and Broken Hill. The whole jaw would be soaked for up to three weeks until the
muscle and tissue surrounding it would soften and rot away so the long tooth could be removed easily.

‘What inspired you to make them in the first place?’ Jodie’s voice ventures, from behind the camera.

‘I guess being a jewellery maker. I made my living making jewellery when I first came to Melbourne and used to make necklaces out of echidna quills, and I saw the image of the kangaroo tooth necklace, like years ago… I went in to the Melbourne Museum to look at the old one, which was absolutely beautiful. So I took really detailed photos and replicated that to a tee. And Len and Rock prepared all the skin for me, because I see this [gesturing to the contents of the table] as having quite a lot of men’s business stuff, and women’s business stuff. You know, two hundred years ago I can’t imagine a woman going out, getting a ‘roo, bringing it back, by herself… skinning it, preparing the skin, chopping the tail off, getting the sinew out of the leg and the tail, to make this. I just can’t imagine it…’

The film then cuts to Len, a Gunni man, and good friend of Maree. He lays a skinned kangaroo tail on the table. He skillfully and swiftly inserts his knife at the rump of the tail and runs the blade sharply along its entire length, pulling a thin thread of sinew away from the flesh and begins to chew. Like a length of dental floss he chews and pulls the thread through his mouth quickly. This softens the sinew, making it supple and elastic to wrap tightly around the teeth. As it dries it shrinks and grips the teeth tightly as they dangle from the leather.

The camera returns to Maree. Her hands flit from the teeth to the kangaroo skin as she gestures how she would shave the fur, stain the skin with ochre, rub it with emu oil to soften it again, and then cut incisions where the teeth are to go, feed them through the small holes and bind them with the prepared sinew.

After Maree had gathered layer upon layer of information, from her existing knowledge as a Mutti Mutti/Yorta Yorta women, her experience as a jewellery maker, her Elders, her study of historical documents and photographs and existing traditional artifacts; she had acquired a ‘know-how’, a set of skills which equipped her with the ability to re-create an item which had not been made for several generations.

The video depicted Maree demonstrating this kind of knowledge as complete and embodied. This chapter will go on to examine how this came about, through the three ‘know-hows’ identified earlier; archival research, community learning, and Ancestral knowledge.
Archival Research

I’d wanted to make a necklace like this for years after I saw an historic photograph of a woman wearing a necklace and a headband made out of kangaroo teeth. Fifteen years later we’d collected enough teeth to make two of the large necklaces, one smaller one and a head band. Maree 2010

The rare books cabinet contained a number of publications from the nineteenth century, from photographic collections to amateur ethnographies, and in amongst them lay a copy of James Dawson’s Australian Aborigines, first published in Melbourne in 1881. The image Maree was referring to was a black and white photograph of Yarruun Parpur Tarneen – a name which, according to Dawson, translated as ‘victorious’ – the Chiefess of the Morporr Tribe16 in the 1840s. As Maree deduced, Yarruun Parpur Tarneen was a very important woman. A woven head band was pulled down over her dark curls, and sat tightly across her forehead. A possum skin cloak draped from her left shoulder skin-side out, which she had pulled over her breasts with tight fists, wrapping it around her entire body but leaving her right arm bare. The kangaroo tooth necklace hung around her neck – the tightly packed, bright white teeth suspended from the strip of kangaroo leather sat in contrast against her dark skin.

This photograph and the descriptions in old texts and sketches Maree came across certainly coloured her approach the project, but not all the information she was looking for was there. As Maree explained in her Master’s thesis:

In the past, when the museum acquired Aboriginal artefacts, they sometimes didn’t record all of the details. This meant that there was then a break in the knowledge. We have our own collection of artefacts at the Koorie Heritage Trust, but we don’t have that layer of information about what the designs were about (Clarke 2009:8).

This ‘break in the knowledge’ Maree describes reminds us that it is not just the quality and accuracy of these depictions of knowledge which prove problematic, but the frequent absence of any attempt of recording at all.

Maree, however, persevered, determined to gather any fragments of information she could, and considered this innovation a necessity for craft revival:

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16 Morporr Tribe as identified by James Dawson; ‘[t]he Spring Creek tribe is called ‘Mopor,’ and a member of it ‘Mopor kuurndit’. Its language is called ‘Kii wuorong,’ meaning ‘Oh, dear! lip.’ Its country, commencing at the swamp Marramok on Minjah station, extends to Woolsthorpe, to Ballangeich, up Muston's Creek to Burrwidgee, through the centre of Mirraswuto swamp to Goodwood House, thence to Bunbatt, and to starting point’ (2010:2-3). This region is directly west of Melbourne, a few kilometres inland from the Great Ocean Road town, Warmambool.
I think it’s up to the individual to go and do the research and then, like myself, the reading. But also the looking and the detailed photos – trying to understand what they’re looking at, and then recreating it. I just love that, you know. And then to be able to take my nieces and nephews on that journey because I didn’t have anyone to show me. Maree 2011

As Maree trawled through books and photographs to locate these scraps of information, she stumbled across another rarely seen artifact which was also crafted from kangaroo teeth. From Maree’s research her friend and colleague Len, was able to recreate two kinds of engraving tools which would have been used for carving markings into wooden artifacts and weapons. As Len explained:

It actually came out of Maree who had been working on a project for fifteen years – it was all part of Maree’s kangaroo tooth necklace exhibition thing.

The exhibition he was referring to was the *Meerreeng-An Here is My Country* show, which was installed to coincide with the book launch, and a project I was involved in. Len donated his engraving tools to the Trust, just in time for them to be displayed, as the following excerpt from my field notes explains:

The collection’s workroom, two doors away from the public gallery, is the air-lock between the outside world and the carefully controlled conditions of the collections store, which lies behind yet another door. A workbench runs around the left and back walls, and a large table stands in the middle. Each surface is covered with a thin white foam-like material too rigid to drape neatly around the edges, so instead it sticks out four inches or so. The skirt of this white foam around the table is now dog-eared and softened, draping a little more after several months of bodies pressing up against it to peer more intently at the artefacts lying at the table’s centre.

‘These are Len’s’, Chris explains, gesturing to the items in the centre of the work table. Laid out on their sheets of folded tissue paper are two hafted wooden tools measuring no longer than half a foot in length. At the top of one of the items, two sharp curved white teeth protrude from the tight bulbous wrap of fibre string which binds them to the wood. ‘This is his possum jaw engraving tool’.

We were there to register these items into the Trust’s collection. We gently turned them over in our gloved hands, and took note of any loose fibre, cracks or chips. We measured their length and depth and listed the materials they are composed of; lower jaw of a brush-tailed possum, wood, fibre, gum… We painted a tiny patch of clear nail varnish directly on to the wooden handle and when dry we wrote on each, in tiny script, their accession numbers, which was then painted over with another thin layer of nail polish. On small white tags we inked the
items’ details, and then looped the label around the tool’s handle. On an A4 photocopied form we took a note of all the details we knew: the maker – Len Tregonning; his language group – Gunnaí; the materials used; and most importantly why and how Len decided to make such artefacts in twenty-first century Melbourne.

Only two examples of such Nineteenth century engraving tools have been identified in museum collections; one crafted out of a possum jaw held by Museum Victoria, and the other made from kangaroo teeth is kept at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

There are, however, references to such things in a few historical texts, including a large old book entitled The Aborigines of Victoria written by Robert Brough Smythe in 1878, which is carefully locked away in the rare books cabinet in the Trusts’ library:

The tool with which the natives used to ornament their wooden shields and other weapons is called Leange-walert. The lower jaw of the opossum is firmly attached to a piece of wood (which serves as a handle) by twine made of the fibre of the bark of Eucalyptus oblique and gum. This tool, simply as it is, enables the blacks to carve patterns in the hard, tough woods... with ease and rapidity... (Smythe 1878:349).

From the photographs and the passages of description from Smythe’s nineteenth century publication, Len crafted these replications, gleaning all he could from static records of information, which Maree had salvaged and presented him with.

As Maree and Len collated this information, these words on a page became embodied knowledge. At what point did this collated information become knowledge, and at what point did a set of theoretical instructions become an embodied, know-how? Knowing how and knowing that are two popular differentiations, separating the theoretical from the practical (Ryle 1949 in Harris 2007:3). To know how is to be skilled at a task and knowing how to put something into action in a specific context, to know that is theoretical or factual knowledge determined by a set of abstract rules which are not governed by context (ibid). These oppositions have also been termed as non-propositional or a posteriori and propositional or a priori, respectively. However, as the making of the Kangaroo tooth necklace and Len’s engraving tools reveals, in the enactment of what the artists know, the two categories blur and merge to a point where they become indecipherable from one another – one does not follow the other, but they emerge and work together in tandem.

The historical documents and photographs that contributed to Maree’s projects were products of a very ‘Western tradition preoccupied with analytical and theoretical ways of knowing, episteme, devaluing and misrepresenting practical and contextual knowledge, techne’ (Palsson 1994:903).
Through such extraction from the lived-in world into written texts, Indigenous knowledge inevitably loses its ‘holistic’ oral form and its connection to the social context (Nakata and Langton 2005:9-10):

Learning cannot be understood in isolation from the dense network of cultural information in which it is embedded. Knowledge is itself a cultural artefact and knowledge construction is a sociocultural event (Hansen 1982:190).

A few weeks later Len and I sat down in the Moogji Lounge, each with a cup of tea, and he began to tell me more about the processes and motions he went through to make those engraving tools. Maree, he told me, had carried out the bulk of library and archival research, from which Len saw photographs and passages from books.

Community Learning

Len’s learning of this craft did not emerge solely from this academic research. There was a fusing of his own Aboriginal cultural knowledge with these early written records and photographic images. It is now hard to tell where one ends and the other begins.

I went to ask three Uncles for permission because, you know, we haven’t made these things for ages – in the old days there used to be a whole process. Learning then waiting until you were ready to be taught that. But in our case we were forbidden... Yeah, it wasn’t reinventing, it was just rejuvenating that knowledge. It was an old practice that was kind of not done... The carving tool itself, that’s a kangaroo tooth, the only difference is that it’s not fresh – the enamel is brittle so you wouldn’t be able to carve with that, but it’s an example of what the old ones would look like. And that’s binding it as well with resin, and that’s from a gum tree... and some shell which you grind down and make into a paste and it sets like cement. Then you actually bind it out of stringy bark which is a tree which usually grows in colder Country... a colder climate. You actually rip off strips of the stringy bark – its kindda red all the way through, and you kind of twist and that [Len places one hand on top of the other – palms facing and quickly slides them away from each other], and you can actually fold it and turn it into rope – and that’s what makes it pliable. Len 2011

As Len spoke he made no further reference to Smythe’s text or about the original engraving tools on which his works are based. The information had been absorbed and reinterpreted, and through his existing knowledge of cultural practices he was able to transpose this information into the two new engraving tools. As he spoke about the techniques and how he located and manipulated materials into their final form, I questioned how he knew how these things were done. How did he know how to roll
the stringy bark in such a way? How did he know the speed and pressure he need apply to the raw material as he pushed it between his palms to transform it into something so strong?

*I learnt [that] from Wally Cooper – he’s my cousin. I’ve learnt things from people – even as simple as fiddling that twine, I learnt off Wally who learnt off his grandfather.*

As Len’s story demonstrates, the textual information and his engagement with fellow craftspeople in his community resulted in various ‘ways of knowing’ merging and evolving into a body of knowledge which furnished them with the know-how of how to make these particular Koorie artifacts. As Ingold explains:

*Information, in itself, is not knowledge, we do not become any more knowledgeable through its accumulation. Our knowledgeability consists, rather, in the capacity to situate such information, and understand its meaning, within the context of direct perceptual engagement with our environments. And we develop this capacity, I contend, by having things shown to us (2000:21).*

Maree’s existing knowledge and skill of working with echidna quills to craft equally intricate necklaces also aided her in the making of the kangaroo tooth necklace:

*Most of my work is based on collaborative practice because the significance of passing on cultural knowledge is important to me. The practice of sharing knowledge and working collaboratively is an inherent part of how I work. I like my family to be around when I’m working so that I can pass that knowledge on. ... My work was also drawn from many different stories passed onto me by Elders and other people in my family. In the last trip I did to Baranald, we lived on the mission down by the river and my Aunt, my mum’s first cousin, took us out to the mission and started telling us stories from around that area. She now thinks we’re of age now where she can pass on certain stories. I’ll go up again and hear more of those stories and come back and start making some work (Clarke 2009:11).*

Maree described how her engagement with her Country and community enabled her to access another kind of knowledge through Deep Listening, or Dadirri.

*The concept Dadirri appears in many Aboriginal languages and describes a process of listening deeply in ways which build community. It is the process not just of listening to the Elders, but looking at Country and seeing what is there. It’s something you do unconsciously (Clarke 2009:11).*

This unconscious acquisition of knowledge was not a new experience for Maree, as she had engaged with her community in this way for her entire life, but as she brought these two ways of knowing
together she brought together a body of knowledge which enabled her to execute the making of the kangaroo tooth necklace. This way of knowing was generated through interaction, reflection, and engagement with Maree’s Elders and peers.

This kind of tacit knowledge, opposed to the written, textual ‘way of knowing’ we explored above, can be paralleled to what theorists of social memory have described as ‘autobiographical’ opposed to ‘historical’ (Halbwachs in Coser 1992), ‘imbedded’ opposed to ‘inscribed’ (Connerton 1989), or ‘repertoire’ opposed to ‘archival’ (Taylor 2003).

These two ‘ways of knowing’ go a long way to explain how Maree and Len generated this new kind of knowledge which was negotiated and emergent, becoming visible through interactions and with bodies of information and people (Josephides and Grønseth 2013 in press). There was, however, a third ‘way of knowing’ which was spoken about on numerous occasions by both artists and Trust staff. Ancestral knowledge was spoken about in several ways; as an experience of transcendence, a gradual emergence of understanding, or a powerful intuition. Below I will discuss how these experiences also informed the repertoire of ‘knowledge’, which led to the several examples of craft revival that feature in this thesis.

**Ancestral Knowledge**

As I explored in the previous chapter, the cloak makers were able to communicate, and glean clarity and knowledge from Ancestors as they engaged with artifacts and images during the process of ‘making’. As Vicki explained:

> I’m firmly in the belief that we have ancestral memories, that it comes from within. The connections to the cloak and to the designs – they’re the knowledge from the Old People speaking to me through my spirit (Reynolds 2005:42).

Vicki likened this kind of Ancestral knowledge to dreaming:

> The acquisition of knowledge by way of dreams is a phenomenon that is well known and widely accepted in Aboriginal cultures across Australia, and indeed around the world (Couzens 2011, www.cv.vic.giv.au).

I asked Jodie what this experience was like, and she explained that her understanding was that she, and every other Aboriginal person, has an innate intuition. ‘It’s always there, I think. It’s inside you. It’s just you realize it when something triggers it’. Jodie explained how she once came across a container in the collections store which she had never seen before. Inside was human hair. She was suddenly over come with fear and while she couldn’t articulate why she felt so scared and
uncomfortable, her intuition told her that this was not an object she should be close to. That evening she phoned her grandmother. ‘Yes’, her grandmother had told her, human hair in that context, can be a very dangerous thing to be close to. With no further explanation, to me at least, Jodie knew that she had to ensure that the collections store was a safe and pleasant place for her to work. She wrote a policy document outlining the appropriate action to be taken on discovering any item which may be considered to be ‘culturally sensitive’.

As I discussed at the opening of this chapter, if we adopt Berger and Luckman’s definition of knowledge, which describes it as a ‘certainty that phenomena are real’ (1966:1), both Vicki and Jodie’s experiences can certainly be classified as a kind of ‘knowledge’.

Unsurprisingly, the study of this kind of innate, tacit kind of knowledge has been neglected, as ethnographers have focused on the kinds of knowledge they can indeed access and analyse; the kinds that are expressed explicitly (Harris 2007:12).

This third ‘way of knowing’ gives a new dimension to the other, easily comprehended and rationalized ways of knowing, which emerged through the process of research and making.

Conclusions

As Maree engaged with objects, materials, and people during the making of her necklace, numerous ‘ways of knowing’ revealed themselves. Knowing, it appears, is a practical and continuous activity and it occurs as one is moving through the world (Harris 2007:1). The transiency of knowledge leads to consideration of its fundamentally subjective nature. Knowledge is not a static object which can be handled and passed on from one agent to another, but it is generated through interactions between agents, and these agents do not necessarily move in synchronicity creating perfect facsimiles of ‘knowledge’ from one generation to the next.

So, if the specific way of knowing or of making something is not a prescription which all members of that group adhere to, then how is it possible to say that this is a particularly ‘Koorie’ item? As I will explain in the next chapter, it is about learning the parameters of one’s body, the materials, and the immediate surrounding environment. As this environment or materials change, so do the parameters.

17 It is important to acknowledge here that not all artists’ experiences are the same; not all artists experienced the ‘ancestral presence’ both Vicki and Jodie described. Karen Clarke-Edwards, another participant in the Commonwealth Games possum skin cloak project (discussed in chapter two), illuminates her different experience during an interview for the ABC (Banks 2008). In response to a question from her interviewer, directly enquiring as to whether, for her, the project generated similar Ancestral connection as Vicki, she acknowledges a shared desire to revive techniques, but argues this particular artistic venture was a ‘contemporary’ one. Of course this is a secondary source, and thus I did not have the ability to pose questions to clarify this viewpoint and gain further insight, but it is certainly fair to say that Vicki and Jodie’s experiences were not shared by all artists working on projects such as those alluded to in this thesis. This lack of consensus does not reflect any shortcomings in my data but illuminates the precise complexity and multiplicity of ideas on philosophy, politics and spirituality amongst these Koorie artists which inspired this thesis.
Despite the arrival of Europeans and the damage this did to Koorie cultures, practices continued, sometimes under the radar, and sometimes in the form of ‘tourist art’, practices were adapted – know-how changed.

While this goes some way to explain the running thread of ‘Koorieness’, there is another dimension to this feeling of who and what they are which cannot be explained away with rationalisms. As numerous artists and colleagues explained to me over the course of my field work, ancestral knowledge brings about a clarity and understanding of Country and the significant cultural practices, such as the crafting of kangaroo tooth necklaces, possum skin cloaks, and baskets, that go on within it. They don’t believe in this ancestral knowledge, they know it.

As Maree learnt how to choreograph an eclectic array of information into the crafting of a necklace, there was a transformation of propositional information into something else – in to an embodied ‘whole’ knowledge of how to do something.

The highly charged post-colonial context of my field site highlighted the intrinsic link between knowledge and power as artists recovered texts and photographs which, to a degree, determined how these examples of creative pursuits were achieved. Photographs and texts were not the only catalysts for these endeavors however; the artists each learnt and adapted existing skills they had learnt from colleagues, peers, and Elders. Knowledge, though, is not always achieved, as the artists explain experiences of ‘knowing’ through the transcendence of ancestral knowledge, and sometimes awakening of innate knowledge through an ancestral connection.

Knowledge is not a bound body of knowledge – it is generated through interactions, and thus objects, texts, and images do not ‘contain’ knowledge itself, but information, and they are potential sites for an artist of begin to carve a ‘way of knowing’. It is only through this bodily action of engaging with objects, people, and materials that this collation of information becomes recognizable as a knowledge.
Chapter Four

Sneaking stitches, fumbling fingers and dextrous digits

*I was a great one for sitting amongst the old people because I knew I was learning something just by watching them. But if I asked a question they would say, 'Run away, Connie. Go and play with the rest of the kids.' They didn’t want us to learn. My mum told me we were coming into the White people’s way of living. So she wouldn’t teach us. That is why we lost a lot of culture. But I tricked her.*

*I watched her and I watched those old people and I sneaked a stitch or two*

(Connie Hart as cited in Jackomos and Fowell 1991:74)

Connie Hart was a Gunditjmara woman and a renowned weaver within the Koorie community. She was instrumental in ensuring the stitches she had ‘snuck’ were passed on to future generations. Although Connie had died nearly twenty years before, her reputation as a master weaver lived on; five examples of her work were to be displayed at the Trust’s upcoming exhibition, *Poong’ort*, which was also to be dedicated to her tireless contribution to the continuation of the craft.

The Trust kept files for many artists whose works were held in the collection. They were used during the curatorial process to piece together biographies of the contributors and stories of their artwork. I was handed a stack of a dozen folders, and asked to trawl through each of them in search of quotations which could be used to annotate the exhibition. The aim was to create a chorus of artists’ voices which would collectively narrate the story of the continuing tradition of Koorie weaving in Victoria.

I thumbed through these files armed with a highlighter, and dashed lines of yellow and green through the most powerful sound bites. As I unearthed transcribed interviews, essays, old exhibition catalogues, letters, questionnaires, newspaper clippings, and blotchy photocopied pages of books, I gathered snippets of Connie’s life. She spoke about growing up on Lake Condah Aboriginal Reserve, how she learnt to weave, where to find the right kind of grass, why her Elders had forbidden it, and why and how she began to teach the next generation. Connie’s story was powerful. Despite her

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*18 A Gunditjmara word for the spear-grass which was used in many of the woven items in the collection. It is also spelt *Puun'jart*, but after deliberation with Elders and colleagues at the Victorian Aboriginal Language Council, the senior curators decided to use the *Poong’ort* spelling.*
Elders’ reluctance to teach her, she observed and imitated their technique, and learnt through seeing and doing. This chapter will examine this process of enskilment.

The weaving tradition of the Koorie women in south east Australia is perhaps a less dramatic example of craft revival when compared to the stories of the kangaroo tooth necklace and the possum skin cloaks. These other artists appeared to resuscitate specific craft practices which had been lying, largely dormant, in museum collections and archives for decades. Their means of acquiring the information they needed and transforming it into a body of useful knowledge appeared to be a convoluted process, dependent on interpretation and trial and error. This is not to suggest that these processes were entirely void of the kind of apprenticeship learning which is characterized by the passing on of information from generation to generation. As Len explained in the previous chapter, he learnt how to manipulate stringy bark into a strong twine from his cousin, who had in turn learnt from his grandfather. However, these moments were often only alluded to briefly, and then obscured by detailed descriptions of the more laborious processes of deciphering the written words of European ethnographers and transposing them into an action.

Weaving, on the other hand, was steadily continued by individuals throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century’s, sometimes under the guise of ‘tourist art’ and often in defiance of assimilation policies which prohibited it. As I will explore in more depth later, another crucial difference between these two kinds of making is how, when weaving, the form appears to emerge from a rhythmic repetition of an action - a movement - opposed to the collation and arrangement of different materials in a recognized order and configuration, as appeared to be the case with the other craft works examined in this thesis. As this chapter will reveal, weaving illustrates the embodiment of skill which goes on in the making of all of these artefacts, but often remains misunderstood as ‘a simple process of imprinting, in which a whole inventory of rules and representations is miraculously downloaded into the passively receptive mind of the novice’ (Ingold 2000:36).

This chapter tells the story of Poong’ort – an exhibition and a series of workshops which illuminate the processes of enskilment that are so central to this thesis. I will highlight the complexities of the bodily engagement necessary in the making of things, the importance of the materials used in this process and, crucially, the social and interactive nature of this embodiment and how this appeared to constitute a kind of social memory.

As this chapter will reveal, weaving was spoken about as a kind of ‘know-how’ which was part of a repertoire of such practices that, once acquired, were considered to be both expressions of ‘Koorie-ness’ and a means to generate and proliferate ‘Koorie-ness’ throughout the community, and within oneself.
As the Koorie women learnt to weave, they used their bodies, their minds, and their surrounding environment; an indissoluble trinity (Marchand 2010: s2; Ingold 2000:164). Through the stories which were found in the artists’ files, the discussions and activities I observed and participated in during preparation for the exhibition, the interactions between fellow weavers (of which I was one), and their tactile engagement with materials during the workshop, I was able to gain some understanding of how the craftswomen embodied these skills, and how fumbling fingers became dextrous digits.

Practice theory goes some way to explain how these weavers acquired this kind of ‘practical mastery’ and why it is understood to be such a significant cultural accomplishment. This will be explained through the employment of Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, which can be described as a deeply internalised (Ortner 2006:7) ‘structuring structure’ which consists of the unconscious dispositions and sensibilities, internalized through interaction with people and the physical environment’ (Downey 2010:22), largely inaccessible to consciousness’ (Ortner 2006:7). However, there are some serious problems with this approach concerning the presuppositions of the concept of habitus itself, and Bourdieu’s broader project of practice theory, both of which will be addressed as they rear their heads in the fabric of the chapter.

The materials that the artists use are also of interest when considering their path to enskilment. Not only do they bear significance in ‘connection to Country’ and to the weavers’ specific language groups (both geographically and spiritually), the materiality of the substances themselves are also important. Learning how to manipulate the different grasses by soaking, drying, splitting, and knotting, and introducing new, substitute materials, requires an awareness of the properties and qualities of each substance. As I examine the idea of habitus and the ‘unconscious dispositions and sensibilities’ (Downey 2010:22) it involves, I will argue that the acquired ability to make things is dependent of the materials involved as well as the human agent. I will engage with Ingold’s critique of the hylomorphic model of creation which urges us to reconsider the presumption that ‘making’ is simply a matter of imposing form on to a material (2010:91). I will demonstrate that part of what makes the artists’ repertoire of bodily actions specifically Koorie is their knowledge of how to manipulate and work with these specific local materials – their tacit knowledge of the properties and limitations of such substances.

As we have already seen, practice theory stipulates that learning occurs through doing and participating rather than through the application of an abstract set of instructions, but Boudieu’s habitus is primarily concerned with the unconscious bodily actions which are absorbed before any reflection or objectification. Throughout the Poong’ort project I was acutely aware of the structures of apprenticeship which involved very self-conscious efforts to communicate these skills which were acted out in numerous contexts. The artists’ files revealed weavers had learnt the craft from Elders,
family, friends, and colleagues in private homes and in more formal workshop settings. By reflecting on these stories and my own experiences as a neophyte weaver attending one of the several Poong’ort workshops, this chapter also explores the complexities of the ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1999) in which the master-apprentice, as well as apprentice-apprentice relations were revealed, and the challenges this poses to the pre-objectified, pre-reflexive, unconscious learning of habitus.

As the story of Poong’ort unfolds I explore how these different takes on theory of practices – both habitus and the multifaceted notion of apprenticeship, and the role of the materials used in the process of weaving explain the processes of enskilment.

June 2011 – Preparing Poong’ort: Spear-grass

Poog’ort showcases the strength of weaving held in the KHT collection and highlights the diversity of weaving across the Victorian Koorie community... Stories shared by the weavers reveal the strong links between weaving traditions and Koorie heritage and identity.19

Jodie led me to one of the doors tucked away at the back of the ground floor. It felt like a privilege to be allowed back stage into the very belly of the beast - to the work room and the collections store. Thousands of artefacts sat waiting for their chance to be gently picked by the white cotton gloves, turned over, examined, made sense of, and then, maybe, carefully carried through to the workroom where they would be prepared for exhibition.

The workroom was the decompression chamber. Everything paused for a moment on its way out, and then stayed for a week or so on its way back in. It was the space where new acquisitions were placed on layered sheets of fine white tissue paper, waiting for creatures that may have once made it their home to crawl out and show themselves. It was where we would await Elders to come and tell us who the artefact’s maker was, to decipher the tools that were used or the totems depicted. Here the artefacts were turned over and over, eyed up, measured and written about – noting distinctive Koorie motifs, markings, and materials.

Beyond this room was the emporium – the collections store. It wrapped itself around the work room in an L-shape. To the right eclectic splatters of colour lined the shelves. A papier-mâché goanna stood on his hind legs stretching two feet tall, painted with intricate patterns and vibrant detail, alongside bowls, plates, tiles and other functional ceramics glazed with recognizable Koorie motifs such as diamond and zigzags. In amongst them stood a pack of dingoes each maybe eight inches from nose to tail, one lying down as if basking in the sun, another standing alert, sniffing the air, and a third sitting

19 This text appeared on the ‘welcome panel’, which was hung from the ceiling beams at the entrance to the exhibition space.
down, washing. Each was painted with an underbelly of dusty ochre and a grey striped back. A shelf on the adjacent wall housed trophies which were mostly for sporting achievements and various awards the Trust itself had won. However, it was the items on the shelf above these gold and silver trinkets that Jodie had brought me to see.

A contraption around three feet long made of sculpted, moulded, bent and folded chicken wire, dried grass, and loosely woven netting, formed a tube. It was decorated with colourful ribbons woven in and out of the gaps, in haphazard stripes of teal, orange, red and yellow.

‘It’s a modern day interpretation of an eel trap.’ Jodie explained, ‘They made it at a weaving workshop that happened here a few years ago.’

Next to it lay a more traditional looking object – also an eel trap, but woven out of dried grasses. A solid and dense weave made for a sturdy looking object, and as the grasses had dried and shrunk with age, the weave was pulled tighter still. The base of the tube was wide and splayed out like the brim of a straw hat, then tapered in and out again creating a bulge in its centre, narrowing again to form a cone at the other end.

‘It’s got the small opening at the end there so the smaller fish can escape, while the larger fish would get caught in the bulge here. It would be placed in a river so the current would be pushing through, so they wouldn’t be able to swim back out the other way.’ Jodie explained this example of an eel trap was made in the mid nineteen-eighties by Connie Hart. There were more of these large woven baskets and eel traps on the opposite shelves, each varying in colour across a spectrum of faded green, deep yellow-gold and dark brown. The darker grass usually indicated age; one of the baskets with a strong round handle, more brown than yellow, was likely to be over 100 years old.

Around the corner and the open shelves of emporium cave was gone. There were two rows of green metal cabinets, one on top of the other, spanning most of the height and running the entire length of this section of the room. As Jodie flicked the catch and lifted the cumbersome metal cabinet-front on to the floor, she revealed shelves of tiny, intricately woven baskets, coolamons, baby carriers20, and smaller fish traps. The materials and weave differed from object to object, some were rings of multi-coloured raffia, others finely woven pine needle, but many were made from the same tradition grass that had been used for generations; poong’ort.

Jodie had invited me in to the collections store that day so I could get a feel of the extent and breadth of woven artefacts the collection housed. We were in the midst of preparing for the Poong’ort exhibition which was only going to be able to accommodate a fraction of such items.

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20 A woven disc, with another slightly smaller disc placed on top and sewn on to form a pocket where the baby would sit.
As we wandered back to the office it dawned on me that those baskets posed an entirely different problem to the other artefacts I had come across in my field work. The kangaroo tooth necklace, the possum skin cloaks, the possum jaw and kangaroo tooth engraving tools were all assembled from different ingredients which, after chewing, soaking, staining, carving, cutting, sticking, wrapping, binding, and sewing together, became recognisable tools or adornments. As Ingold writes ‘...evidently a basket is not made through the forcible imposition upon material substance of some pre-existing design... in weaving a surface is built up rather than transformed and the spiral form of the basket emerges through the rhythmic repetition of movement in the weaving process rather than originating in the makers mind’ (2000:290). How did the artists’ arms, hands and fingers come to ‘know’ how to move in and around a handful of dried grass in that particular way? How did they know how to use their finger nails to split blades of grass in two at just the right angle, with the correct pressure and speed, to knot and weave the strands in a steady rhythm in the way that created a coil which eventually pulled itself up into a half-sphere?

What I mean to say here is viewing a photograph, a sketch, or even seeing and touching a physical example of a basket would probably not give much of a clue as to how it was constructed. Maree diagnosed the make-up of her kangaroo tooth necklace from her detailed photographs and examining how each of the constituent parts fitted neatly together: the thin leather strips which looped through the punctured holes in the wider length of leather, the teeth attached to these strips with the wrapping and binding of sinew. For Maree, Len, and the cloak makers, the processes appeared to require (at least partially) a conscious synthesis of information: translating the written word and still images into an action and transforming information into knowledge. The image of Maree’s kangaroo tooth necklace, as explored in the last chapter, has become almost emblematic of craft revival, a motif which Maree and others set out to reproduce. Weaving, on the other hand, is not about the reproduction of the motif, but about mastering a movement (Makovicky 2010). Ingold describes this approach to making sense of the making of Maree’s necklace as reading ‘creativity “backwards”, starting out with an outcome in the form of [an object] and tracing it, through a sequence of antecedent conditions, to an…idea in the mind of the agent’ (2010: 97). A more accurate way of studying creativity, Ingold suggests, is to read it as an ‘ongoing generative movement’ and to observe as how an artefact ‘unfolds into the world’ (ibid).

It is important to understand how the making of Maree’s necklace, Len’s engraving tools, and the possum skin cloaks seem to proliferate the pervasive hylomorphic model for creativity which I am trying to counter. Probably most fundamental is the limitations of my field method. Many of the craft revival projects I came across during my time in the field were years in the making and were not always widely known about until their successful completion. My relatively short sixteen-or-so months of voluntary work at the Trust did not provide an opportunity to see such a process develop from beginning to end, which may well have exhibited the ‘ongoing generative movement’ Ingold
describes. The second obstacle is the fact that these stories of creation tend to begin with the artists’ study of a physical example, an image or description of the finished artefact. The eye of the observer is drawn from the original image which inspired the artist, to the new interpretation, celebrating the execution of the facsimile, but skipping over the processes involved in getting there.

However, if one takes time, through reflexive interviews and conversation, to consider the apparently unitary accomplishments of mastering the extraction of teeth from the kangaroo jaw, the skinning, shaving, and oiling of the kangaroo leather, and the chewing of the tail sinew, it is clear that these processes are executed in prescribed succession, and they are gradual and generative. Each of the artists learnt how to manipulate and utilize these materials for their specific purpose by engaging with them and acquiring knowledge of how to work within the resisting and acquiescing properties of each substance. The artists each found the ‘grain’ of the material and ‘follow[ed] its course while bending it to their evolving purpose’ (Ingold 2010:92). These processes of making are not, as Ingold says, a matter of ‘imposing preconceived ideas on inert matter but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of materials wherein forms are generated’ (ibid). It is not just the achievement of completing the final product that is important to the artists, but the processes and the materials themselves.

The very reason this study came about was due to the apparent centrality of art and craft practices to Koorie culture. This was reaffirmed during a conversation I had with Len in the days leading up to the launch of Poong’ort when I asked him why he thought these projects of craft revival were so important. He answered simply, ‘Art and culture are the same thing... art and culture is one – you can’t separate the two – it’s all part of ceremony, hunting tools, everyday artefacts…’ Len’s words echoed a sentiment which appeared to be shared by many of the staff at the Trust, as well as many artists. On a shelf of the library was a PhD thesis entitled Art is Us (Edmonds 2007), which traced the connection between the practice of art and ‘well-being’ amongst the Koorie community. Having conducted research at the Trust several years beforehand, Edmonds also co-wrote a community report with Maree on the history of survival of art since European contact in 1834 (Edmonds with Clarke 2009), which powerfully reiterated that there is little differentiation between ‘culture’, ‘art’, and ‘Koorie-ness’.

Sourcing the correct materials from a suitable place, and seeking permission from the Elders appropriate to use the materials in certain ways, suggests that the materials themselves signify one’s connection to Country, and knowing how to use them correctly and respectfully is crucial to maintaining this connection and feeling of Koorie-ness. As Len explained:

*I’ll always be checking – in my case with the kangaroo teeth – checking where the teeth come from and what that truly represented because only senior Elders, men and women, would have worn them.*
Maree also explained how the provenance of the materials were so important to her work,

*I collect materials from places I have a blood connection to. Whether this is the skin of a carpet snake or the feathers of a black cockatoo, I need to go upcountry to get the material. When I visit Country, the places I go to I always have a connection to otherwise they have no relevance* (Maree 2009:6).

This was also expressed in amongst the artists’ quotes I had located during my research,

*[My Aunty] had asked me to go out and get some basket grass and I’d come back with this huge big armful – all the wrong grass! So she sent me out and said ‘Go and get the right stuff this time!’*

As this particular weaver learnt, the tacit knowledge and skills that were passed on to her from her Aunty were specific to that particular kind of basket grass. Her Aunty was familiar with the treatment it required and the malleability it permitted.

To extend a metaphor Ingold (2010:94) uses where he likens the world of materials to a kitchen, these craft practices can be likened to the alchemy of baking a cake: whisking eggs to the required ‘fluffiness’, creaming the correct quantities of sugar and butter together to create a smooth paste, sifting the flour, and beating it all together without splitting the mixture. The recipe which the practitioners have come to embody could be understood to be something like *habitus*.

As briefly touched on at the beginning of this chapter, *habitus* is generally understood as the defining concept for Bourdieu’s theory of practice. It is ‘a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions’ (Bourdieu 1990 in Roodenburg 2004:218). For Bourdieu cultural knowledge and social practice is not exported by the mind into moments of action and experience, but is generated through these contexts of people’s interactions with each other and the environment. These interactions result in people acquiring a set of specific dispositions which determine the way in which they orient themselves in their environment and how they ‘attend to its features in the particular ways that they do’ (Ingold 2000:162). Bourdieu describes these specific bodily dimensions of this ‘structuring structure’ as the bodily *hexis*, the ‘practical, bodily action [which] was instilled and guided by, a socially generated habitus’ (Downey 2010:22). Bourdieu defined this *hexis* as the body automatisms of ‘standing, speaking, walking’, the things which are done in everyday life and without a need to ‘think’, those things that ‘[go] without saying because [they] come without saying’ (Bourdieu 1977 in Roodenburg 2004:221).

In short, I am suggesting these dispositions are acquired through, and defined by, interaction with the materials which constitute the artefacts that star in this thesis. There are, however, some problems
with this proposal; Bourdieu stresses the ‘naturalness’ and ‘unconsciousness’ of the acquisition of these automatisms, which are ‘just part of the order of things’ (Roodenburg 2004:219). While the various stages involved in the making in these crafts certainly became embodied into kinds of ‘automatisms’, they were first acquired through a very conscious process of learning where information was mediated, perceived, and reflected upon in a number of ways. Representations are central in the practice, transmission, and continuation of Koorie cultural knowledge in the post-colonial context of south eastern Australia.

As I have briefly mentioned already, while the accounts of continued weaving practice amongst the Koorie community seem to implicate an apprenticeship style of learning, the other artefacts I am interested in were created with reference to written European accounts and documents from the nineteenth century. While the fragments of these apparent ‘cultural scripts’ which describe (or to the contemporary Koorie reader perhaps prescribe) the construction of artefacts are certainly evidence of the ‘linguocentric’ (Hanks 1996:135) tradition of Western culture, it must be kept in mind that these contemporary artists are also part of this tradition. They read, write, and express themselves through the written word, amongst other mediums, and are acutely aware of the partial nature, and sometimes complete absence, of historical records about Koorie cultural practices. As the artists have utilized these fragmentary historical records they have, simultaneously, felt a strong compulsion to fill the lacunae with their own writing, not in lieu of practice, but in tandem with it.21

Practice and theory, it seems, are meaningless without the reference to one another, as was exemplified when Poong’ort was eventually installed.

1st August 2011 – The Opening

The exhibition came together as woven artefacts – old and new – were moved from their usual shelves and drawers in the collection store and mounted in the exhibition space, after information had been teased from books and documents, and artists had shared their stories and knowledge of their craft during lunchtime phone calls. The quotes and stories I had gathered were printed up on to neat rectangles of card and placed next to their corresponding object. The curatorial team drew these things into one space, and manipulated them into a display which told a story of survival and innovation.

The Darren Pattie-Bux Gallery, an open space set off to the right as you first enter the Trust, had been painted black. The dark walls set off the golds, yellows, and brown-greens of the woven artefacts

21 Meerreeng-An Here is my Country, the Trust’s 2010 publication, is a prime example of this and was produced in an explicit reaction to the lack of published work available on the history of art in south eastern Australia (Keeler and Couzens 2010).
mounted behind Perspex, suspended from the beams, and positioned in the glass display cabinets – five of which were dotted down the length of the space. Gusts of wintery wind rushed in through the doors whenever they slid open and the ‘welcome’ text panel, which was suspended from the ceiling by a metal chain, shuddered gently for a few moments.

At the far end of the narrow gallery a large, almost cylindrical, object was suspended by nylon fishing line. It floated at an angle that allowed you to look down the length of its tube – as a fish might have done had the device been used for fishing. It was Connie Hart’s eel trap - the same one Jodie and I had come across in the collections room several weeks earlier.

The older artefacts, some dating back more than a hundred years, were kept in the display cabinets beneath the eel trap at the back of the gallery away from the window and damaging sunlight. While I had learnt that the dark fibre and tight weave were tell-tale signs of older works, it was also apparent on the accompanying labels which revealed that the makers were nearly all ‘Unknown’.

A series of metre-square sheets of Perspex were mounted on the long wall. Behind the plastic, baby carriers, place mats, and a series of woven turtles were attached to a black cotton backdrop with the use of strips of Velcro and the curator’s delicate needle work.

At the front of the gallery, directly behind the hanging text panel, was a black plinth on top of which sat three sheets of laminated paper; ‘Weaving Technique by Vicki Couzens’ - another piece of information I had gleaned from the pile of artists’ files. As I read it I tried to act out the movements she described:

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\text{Holding the coil bunch in your (passive) hand you then take hold of the sharpened strand, circle it away from you, then back towards you (encircling the coil bunch) and holding the strand against the coil bunch thread the sharpened end over the coiled bunch and through the loop. Pull and tighten – this is the first stitch.}
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I had transcribed these instructions from some handwritten notes in Vicki’s artist file just a few days beforehand so I was already familiar with the words, but here, displayed next to her basketry, it appeared as if it ought to make more sense. Despite my efforts to enact the gestures described, I was lost. I felt like I was missing a crucial key to my understanding. The words meant nothing.

As Pálsson and Helgason suggest, ‘on some occasions most of us seek to formulate our tacit, embodied knowledge in general terms by verbal or textual means’ (1998:910), and that is precisely what Vicki had done. The curatorial team had produced a questionnaire which was designed to elicit specific details about each of the weavers’ work. In answer to the question ‘Can you explain the technique?’ Vicki had jotted in blue biro:
Stapled to the questionnaire was a sheet of A4 paper covered, on both sides, with Vicki’s blue-biro calligraphy. Her step by step guide was annotated with asterisks, arrows, crossings out, and ‘NB’s, and put the terms ‘tails’, ‘thread’, ‘folded’ into inverted commas as if they did not quite describe the thing or action she was trying to convey. The limitations Vicki felt in expressing her craft in written language, ironically, could not have been clearer. While Vicki could sit down with a bundle of dried grass, ‘a pair of scissors, a sharpened stick/peg’, and make a coiled basket, as well as teach others, it was clearly difficult to express the process in words.

Without being able to see the way she held the strands of grass between her fingers, the way she moved her hands up and over each other, without the tactile experience of feeling the grass between ones fingers and feeling the tensions that would build within the knotted strands, and without being able to see the visual reassurance of a pattern emerging, I found it was impossible to enact these gestures. It seemed that ‘the practitioner’s knowledge… [is] situated in immediate experience and direct engagement with everyday tasks … [and is]… an emergent and embodied phenomenon. The attempt to conserve practical knowledge and store it ex situ in archives and databases is likely to fail’ (Pálsson and Helgason 1998:909).

However, as we discovered above, Maree, Len, and the cloak makers did manage to retrieve some clues from the archives as to how to execute the practice of making, but it appears the documents they came across proved to be more mnemonic aids than explicit instruction. These documents seemed to prompt the action of a ‘practical mastery’ which was already embodied under a different guise. As Roodenburg observed during his research into the eloquence of the body in the Dutch Republic, ‘no one would ever grasp the codes of physical grace, of knowing how to sit, stand and move… simply by reading a couple of… manuals’ (2004:219). The manuals did not prescribe action, so much as prompt bodily automatisms, to use Bourdieu’s terms, which were already there.

As I have illustrated, language cannot adequately prescribe or instruct how to move our bodies in a certain ways as this is learned in situ, in interaction with others through observation, participation, and imitation.

Bourdieu’s practice theory emerged in answer to Structuralism’s linguistic bias, which was essentially developed to explain the workings of society by using a textual metaphor. Structuralists argued that the ‘grammatical’ rules which govern language could be likened to the external social structures that govern human behaviours. To put it simply, structuralism sees ‘behaviour [as] an ‘effect’ of symbolic structures in the “unconscious” mind’ (Reckwitz 2002:247).
Levis-Strauss developed his theory of structuralism from Saussure’s linguistic model. Saussure
separated language into *langue* which was located in the unconscious, collective mind of a group and
‘beyond the reach of any individual’ where it could not ‘be created or substantially modified by any
singular subject’ (Hanks 1996:26). *Parole*, meanwhile, was the term used to describe the use of these
signs and symbols in everyday life and can be placed in the domain of the individual.

This presupposes that every structuring element (grammar or the rules of society which we function
within) must exist in its own right prior to its utterance or performance by a human agent. In other
words, verbal compositions (or the social script that dictates human action) are separate from the
enactment, and the enactment is simply a matter of bringing this script into line with the mechanical
body, which unconsciously executes the instructions (Ingold 2000:399).

As Ingold elucidates, this approach emerged from a tradition where ‘grammarians and lexicographers’
have tried to rationalise and identify rules and patterns in language in literate societies in which
language is *transformed* (opposed to ‘transcribed’) into writing. This assumes that ‘in learning
language is copied in to the minds of the practitioner in much the same way… it is reproduced on the
printed page’ (Ingold 2000:400). The body is a natural, biological object onto which, through the
mind, a pre-existing language or culture is inscribed.

Merleau-Ponty rejects this ‘lingocentric theory’ (Hanks 1996:135) and stressed the ‘irreducible of a
background horizon of cultural understandings’. From the outset he is concerned with perception and
‘refused to choose between the solipsism of Cartesian subjectivity and the opacity of a world as a
meaningless objectivity. “There is no such thing as an inner man: man is within the world [au monde];
it is in the world that he recognizes himself”’ (Merleau-Ponty in Hanks 1996:136).

In short, Bourdieu’s practice theory argues that these ‘grammatical’ (social) structures and rules
which guide our performance and action in the world do not exist prior to these performances, but are
generated by them and by us, the agents. ‘Culture’ is not ‘an independent body of context-free
knowledge, that is available for transmission prior to the situations of its application’ (Ingold
2000:37), it is generated through these very situations.

All of the positions sketched above, Levis-Strauss’s structuralism, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology,
and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, were each developed to answer bigger questions of how human
beings come to know and live in a cultural or social way. With this in mind, my attempts to apply
these broad theories to the few moments of activity around which this thesis is spun may seem rather
farfetched – for a start these moments of practice were tentative examples of craft revival, and not
moments which can be easily generalised to trends of wider Koorie culture. However, the
shortcomings of language in expressing experience, as Vicki’s instructions did, effectively highlights
the core problem with the dominant Western literary tradition: its roots in the Cartesian separation of
the mind and the body, placing language as the primary mode of engaging with the world. As Vicki’s instructions and the discussion above have illustrated, learning and engaging with the world involves much more than enacting a prescriptive written script. As I will now explore, learning involves social, bodily engagement with the world, or, as Lave terms it, ‘situated social practice’ (1991:69).

To extrapolate from this metaphor, the written language of Vicki’s description and the ethnographies Maree studied, in an attempt to convey actions in the static form of the written word, structures and rules were imposed by utilising ‘artificial scribal conventions’ (Ingold 2000:400), as a means of rationalising and making sense of a kind of tacit knowledge which was generated through an in-body experience in a ‘Community of Practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991), which was evident during the Poong’ort workshops which accompanied the exhibition.

23rd September 2011 – The Workshop

‘When Aunty Con was making the baskets she would tell stories and by the time the stories had finished you were expected to know about the story and know how to make the baskets by watching what she was doing with her hands...[and Aunty Con would say]. ”I’ve shown you how to make the baskets, now go and make them”... and that’s what we did.’

A student of Connie Hart

The workshop was being held in the boardroom on the top floor of the Trust. After months of establishing myself as a volunteer in amongst the collections team on the ground floor, I was again in new territory, now a novice weaver and a student of a craft.

Lave explains legitimate peripheral participation as a ‘two way bridge between the development of knowledgeable skill and identity – the production of persons – and the production and reproduction of communities of practice’, where newcomers become oldtimers (1991:69). While I was certainly a newcomer and my position was on the periphery, the ‘legitimacy’ of my involvement was dubious. Lave uses the term ‘legitimate’ to describe genuine, long-term access to ‘ongoing community practice’. My brief experience at a one day workshop hardly qualifies, but it did provide an access point to observe and interact with other Koorie participants who were part of a much wider community of cultural practice.

The large room was already busy with activity and there was a gentle hum of tentative conversations as women introduced themselves to one another. The tables were set up in a horseshoe formation running round the edge of the room, and at the very back I saw a familiar face, Michaela, whose

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22 This passage came from one of the many archived interview transcripts the collections team used throughout the Poong’ort exhibition.
husband Sam had just started work as the Oral History Officer – a new role within the collections team.

Huge bundles of dried grass lay on carpeted floor at the front of the room, alongside a plastic rubbish bin half-filled with water. Clambering past the small groups of newly acquainted women I made my way over to Michaela who greeted me with a smile, grabbing her handbag from the chair next to her to make room for me. From the back of the room I could see that I was amongst the youngest enrolled in the workshop. Another English woman in her forties was sitting to my left. She was a teacher and loved to engage her class with crafts. Next to her was another woman of a similar age and a postgraduate student of material culture conservation, but by trade a potter and an artist.

At the front of the room a small gaggle of women were disentangling the bundles of grass, scooping small plastic bowls full of water from the rubbish bin, and distributing them among our small groups. A slight woman, perhaps five foot two or three, worked her way round the groups handed each of us a wooden utensil.

Yeah, it’s a peg! In the old days they would use a sharpened thigh bone from a kangaroo as a kind of needle to push the grass through... but this does the same thing.

It was half of a wooden clothes peg, the spring removed and one end sharpened to a point. The adoption of new tools, materials, and the adaptation of techniques was characteristic of all the craft revival projects I have explored in this thesis and it was due to this initiative and creativity that these cultural practices were able to survive at all. While Bourdieu’s *habitus* provides explanation for the apparent set of bodily-automatisms involved in practice, it also stipulates that they are pre-reflexive actions and, as explained earlier, ‘go without saying’. This allows no room for adaption and social change, only recreation and continuation. This will be expanded up on later in this chapter when I consider how Bourdieu’s notion of a society where action is pre-reflexive, pre-objectified, leads to questions of authenticity for social groups, like the Koorie community, who fall outside of this category. Legitimate peripheral participation, meanwhile considers the ‘social relations in which persons and practices change, re-produce, and transform each other’ (Lave 1991:68).

After the materials were distributed and our curious fingers had fiddled with the grasses and inspected our ‘thigh bone’ needles, the small lady hushed us. Her name was Sarah – and I remembered both she and her grandmother had baskets on display downstairs. She explained she was a Yorta Yorta woman, and has learnt from her Grandmother and Aunty.

‘We’re very lucky to have some Elders with us today – they were in the city so I asked them to come along and do some weaving,’ Sarah stood behind one of the older women and bent down to wrap her arms around her, ‘This is my Aunty– she taught me all that I know!’ Sarah had learnt to weave when
she was twelve or thirteen, when she was taught by her Aunty and Grandmother how to know which grass to gather, where to find it, how to prepare it, and then how to ‘sit, talk, and weave’. Sarah had learnt to weave in what could be identified as a typical apprenticeship setting.

The idea of apprenticeship can be explained as being part of ‘technology acquisition support system’ (opposed to an internal device that is innate to an individual) which is ‘constituted by relationships between more and less experienced practitioners in hands-on contexts of activity… it is the reproduction of these relationships, not on genetic replication – or the transmission of some analogous code of cultural instruction – that the continuity of a technical tradition depends.’ As Ingold goes on to explain, ‘[i]t is a matter of “fine-tuning of perception and action”. It is not a transmission of representations, but an education of attention’ (when talking about a novice hunter learning to hunt) (Ingold 2000:37).

As well as my ‘illegitimate participation’, my one day of participation at this workshop was not part of a wider programme of learning in situ, and could not be accurately described as an apprentice experience. However, it did provide an access point into the experiences of other weavers who were positioned along a spectrum of experience, from newcomer, to journeyman, to oldtimer (Lave 1991:68). Apprentice learning was going on around me, but I only entered into the fold for a moment, and would never emerge from my novice state.

There was certainly a hierarchy to be observed in the room, which is often considered characteristic of apprenticeship (Pálsson 1994). As Sarah had informed us, amongst the Elders was the expert from whom she learnt, and throughout the room were other, younger, Koorie women who had woven before, as they twirled the grasses between their fingers before any formal teaching had commenced. The rest of us were novices, with fumbling fingers and not a clue where to begin. This, Lave argues, was symptomatic of the normal changing relationship between the novice and the master, as the newcomer, through ‘increasing participation… in ongoing practice’ were transformed into an oldtimer (Lave 1991:68).

As Pálsson observed, the novice and master in any apprenticeship are rarely on equal terms (1994), but despite this apparent hierarchy it seemed that this structure of apprenticeship was far from lineal – it was more what Pálsson described as ‘open apprenticeship’ – where Sarah and her Aunty could swap in and out of their respective ‘novice’ and ‘master’ roles, and experience ‘mutual enskilment’.

Sarah encouraged us to each introduce ourselves, writing our names on sticky labels and telling everyone why we wanted to learn to weave. Of twenty or so women in the room, perhaps ten identified themselves as Koorie, the rest of us were mostly curious students, teachers, or artists.
'You can chose what kind of stitch you want to learn – the coil stitch is the one I do, and for that we will use this grass’ she gestured to the smaller bundles she had placed in front of us, ‘It has been soaked and has been out drying for a couple of days before, so it shouldn’t be too sharp, but be careful!’ Had the grass not been through this process of soaking and drying, she explained, the edges of the blades would be extremely sharp, and would leave you with stingy, paper-cut-like injuries. By soaking the grasses, they also became pliable. As they would dry out they would become brittle and stiff. The small bowls of water that had been placed in front of us were so we could douse our working thread of grass, when it became too awkward to work with.

The alternative stitch was to be taught by a Gunditjmara woman called Elaine. ‘These ones can be really pretty, but you won’t use grass for all of these – I wouldn’t feel comfortable using grass with yous lot – it’s a cultural thing’, she said with a smile. Instead, we were invited to use grass for the ‘skeleton’ but coloured raffia, bought from the craft store, for the ‘flesh’ of the basket. The coloured raffia could be alternated, creating a striped effect. My group of ladies decided to opt for the alternative stitch. Swayed by the appealing aesthetic of the raffia, as well as the knowledge that it would be an easier material to source in the future, I set aside my plastic bowl of water and bundle of poong’ort, and followed my new friends over to another table to select our brightly coloured bundles of twine.

As we lay our long lengths of raffia next to our clothes-peg needle, it was clear that Koorie weaving practice had changed quite dramatically since the old, dark brown baskets on display downstairs were made. The clothes peg-needles, the coloured raffia, and the plastic handled scissors we had used to cut it with had all been incorporated into the Koorie women’s tradition of weaving as it had adapted and changed to survive the fallout of colonialism. As emphasised earlier, these initiatives enabled crafts to be continued and revived, but the abrupt changes have also led to a wide spread scepticism of their ‘authenticity’.

When developing the notion of habitus, Bourdieu was reflecting on his field work with Algerian Kabylia and he, not unlike myself, was concerned with ‘the survivals of ritual traditions’ (Roodenburg 2004:216). Roodenburg argues that it was Bourdieu’s inadvertent search for authenticity in ‘time-honoured ritual traditions that probably never were’, led to the most fundamental problems with his theory of habitus (ibid).

Bourdieu, Roodenburg observes, never truly acknowledge the major historical events which were transforming Algeria, and were inevitably affecting the Kabyle too: the Algerian War of Independence which broke out during Bourdieu’s time in the field; the long stretch of French colonialism; or the impact of Islam which had dominated the region since seventh century (2004:221). The editing out of these ‘institutionalized and codified forms of power’ from his picture removed the Kabylia away from the here and now, and created an image of a ‘primordial culture’. This gave
Bourdieu the freedom to argue for such a thing as *habitus*, for only in this kind of context, without writing and schooling, could this essentially ‘pre-discursive relationship with the world’ clearly be discerned. With this lack of historicity, *habitus* seems to stand for the inertia of social structures, without any explanation of social *change*, only an explanation of ‘reproduction and continuity’ (*ibid*: 224).

As Elaine began with her few didactic utterances, she moved her body so we could see her hands – a more effective explanation of ‘how-to’. She demonstrated how to split the grasses into strips about four millimetres wide by sharply and quickly drawing her thumb nail down the length of the grass. Once we had between ten and fifteen of these slivers we were to fold them in half to find the middle, then with a short length of raffia tie a tight knot at that point. From there, on our laps, we fanned the grass threads into a flat circle.

> The knot there, is the middle of your basket – you’ll weaved the raffia in and out of the grass and it will build up into a basket – the tension just kind of pulls the side up at a certain point...

Long lengths of the coloured raffia were attached to the knot in the centre, and after a moment of watching Elaine’s hands intently, we crouched over our tangle of fibres and muttered out newly learnt mantra, ‘In, one, two, over, in, one, two, over...’. As our hands adjusted to the rhythm and the intricacies, our quiet concentration was punctuate with the occasional ‘damn!’ as one of us lost our count, or tangled the lengths of twine.

As our confidence grew and our fingers began to repeat the motions without need for a verbal reminder from our lips, we were able to begin talking to one another, getting to know one another, sharing our histories and what brought us all to be sitting in the same room together on a Saturday morning. As we had mastered the technique and rhythm, we had become familiar with the required tensions between the fibres, and *feeling* of the movement. It was at this point we realised we had each reached at least some level of competency. As Ingold says, ‘the novice becomes skilled not through the acquisition of rules and representations, but at the point where he or she can dispense with them’ (2000:415).

It is at this point – when the actions become automatic, when they are no longer thought about, that there is a ‘disappearance of our body from awareness’ (emphasis original Csordas 1994:8), as the ‘body not only projects outward in experience but falls back into unexperienceable depths’ (Leder in Csordas 1994:8). Our bodies ‘disappeared’ and we found ourselves engaging in conversation, and sharing our own stories and, while we were talking, our tangles of dried grasses began to emerge into patterns; my pink and straw-coloured raffia had formed stripes, stretching from the central knot getting wider they worked further up the grass skeleton. The edges had begun to curve up at the sides, and it was beginning to look like what might eventually become a basket.
Every now and then, one or other of us would lose our rhythm and we would forget where our fingers were supposed to be. We would peer at one another’s laps where the strands of raffia were held taught between fingers, observe the correct position, correct ourselves, and carry on. In breaks in the conversations, we compared our work. Michaela’s weave was neater and tighter than mine; as Emma ran out of raffia, she had knotted the new lengths so neatly it didn’t interrupt her smooth pattern at all, while mine was punctuated with bulbous knots. As Hertzfeld said, ‘[b]uilding-craft apprentices effectively “steal with their eyes”’ (Hertzfeld 1995:139-40, 2004: 107, as cited in Marchand 2010:8). As I adapted my technique to imitate my more proficient peers, again it seemed that the apprentice-master relationships were being restabilised. I was now a student of my fellow neophytes, too.

Whenever I lost my rhythm, whatever the reason might be, I was again aware of my clumsy fingers. In these moments I was constantly adjusting my movements, and evaluating my progress. This very reflection was against one of the central tenets of habitus, ‘namely that mastered practices are executed unreflectively’ (Marchand 2010:s14). While I could not have professed myself to be a ‘master’, I noted that the more proficient weavers among our cohort were also murmuring to one another, about better ways to do things and how to overcome problems.

Sarah wandered around the room, sitting and talking with each group for a while. She told us about what she had learnt from her Aunty and grandmother when she was twelve or thirteen, and why it is so important for her to continue to practice this ancient skill;

> Collecting the grass is like knowing where to go, and knowing what to get – it’s like being connected to where you’re from, and when you’re actually weaving it’s like you’re doing something your people have done for thousands of years. You sit and you talk, and you weave.

Sarah’s emphasis on the importance of sitting and talking echoed the sentiment of the quote this section opened with, particularly ‘when Aunty Con was making the baskets she would tell stories and by the time the stories had finished you were expected to know about the story and know about how to make the baskets.’

As the novices learnt how to attune their bodily movements to match their teachers’, the experience was not guided by explicit, didactic instruction (though there were moments of it), but by the constant sharing of stories and gossip. Baskets and stories were woven together and they dynamically perpetuated each other. This social bodily experience generated and was generated by stories – this can be understood as a kind of social memory.

‘Practice and understanding unfold dialogically,’ and this is not just an understanding of ‘apprehension and comprehension’ (Wacquant in Marchand 2010:s10) of the technical execution of a posture or gesture, but the understanding of ‘Koorie-ness’.
As Connerton says, ‘memory is in the hands of the body’ (1989:4), but how then do these subjective bodily experiences result in a collective social memory? I argue that it is through the shared stories and narratives which provide mnemonic reference points and illuminate how the ‘past and present are intertwined without reifying a mystical group mind’ (Olick and Robbins 1998:112).

As the afternoon drew to a close, my new friends and I said our goodbyes – the other women were returning the following morning to continue with their creations, but my work commitments meant I would probably never see them again. We exchanged business cards and phone numbers, and made vague promises we would get in touch and perhaps do some more weaving together over a pot of tea. As we looked around the other small groups of women were chiming similar goodbyes.

**Conclusions**

The process of bodily enskilment in craft revival has proven to be central to the construction of a new social memory in a number of ways. As the weavers learnt their skill, their acquired a repertoire of bodily gestures and postures which enabled them to manipulate the grasses in a particular way. These bodily techniques, I have argued, are entirely dependent on the resisting and acquiescing properties of the materials selected. These bodily techniques, (as Bourdieu would call *habitus*) are specific to the materials and thus to the Country the materials come from – different grasses thrive in different areas. I have argued that the making of things is not a matter of imposing form on a material, but working within the forces the materials themselves exhibit.

Therefore, the process of embodiment also involves a direct connection to Country and the bodily automatisms they display are culturally specific, even when new materials have been adopted. Learning and reviving the practices result in a renewed connection with Country and a specific cultural knowledge. These practices are not static; the artists have adapted and changed materials and techniques in order for the craft to survive. Sourcing alternative materials is a considered process and is recognised as a necessary compromise to enable continued practice. This highlights the shortcomings I alluded to in Bourdieu’s *habitus*, that ‘[w]ithout this essential reflection and adaptation there would never have been any cultural change, so ultimately it appears that *habitus* stands for the inertia of social structures, [and] for the persistence of inexorable traditions’ (Roodenburg 2004:224).

Finally, I illustrated the necessary social situating of learning a craft such as weaving through the setting of the *Poong-ort* workshop. The mastery of bodily technique and skill was accompanied by the learning of a story, through constant communication with fellow neophytes and *oldtimers*. The weavers’ understanding of their ‘Koorie-ness’ was achieved by acquiring these stories and weaving skills; understanding and practice unfolded dialogically.
These Koorie artists, both the contributors to the _Poong-ort_ exhibition and the individuals that I met during the workshop, achieved bodily enskilment through engagement with their environments, their minds, and their bodies. But the question remains, where are non-Koorie participants, such as myself, positioned within this process of enskilment, the acquisition of ‘Kooriness’ and the creation of a ‘social memory’?

After the workshop was over I pondered the question, when is a basket ‘Koorie’ and when is it not? I had produced a woven bowl which seemed to mimic the physicality of what I had been told was a ‘Koorie basket’, but I was left with no doubt my interaction and grasp of ‘Koorieness’ was only a superficial. I was invited to participate in an activity that I had been told reaffirmed women’s connection to Country and cultural identity, but it was clear that for an ‘illegitimate participant’, the experience, rather than bringing me closer to an understanding, highlighted the far reaching complexity of ‘Kooriness’, despite the physical evidence to the contrary.

This observation inevitably leads us down the rabbit warren of discussions surrounding cultural copyright (Brown 1998), authenticity (Hall 2006), and to the critical question, what do these artists have to gain from claiming this style of basketry as their own?  

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23 While these are pertinent questions this thesis does not have the scope to examine them in any greater depth however, they have certainly informed the path this discussion has taken. The popular notion of authenticity is something Koorie artists have had to grapple with as they tried to forge their way into the national and international art scenes. Urban Aboriginal art, until recently, was regarded at best a hybrid form of art with no market, at worst an attempt to cash in on the ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art scene flourishing further north. This thesis emerged from discussions I had with artists and colleagues at the KHT who expressed frustration at this lack of recognition.
Reflections

_Wumen balt jindiworaback – Come together strong_24

This thesis has explored how, through engagement with craft revival practices, Koorie artists and staff at the Koorie Heritage Trust have expressed renewed kinds of ‘social memory’. Memories, after all ‘mold, create, and sustain meanings’ and those meanings inform the present and the future (Climo and Cattell 2002:2). When I speak of social memory here, I am not referring to a something which is unilaterally shared amongst everyone who identifies themselves as ‘Koorie’. Instead I am interested in how a handful of individuals have conceptualised their cultural, or social, past and shared it among the immediate community at the Koorie Heritage Trust. I consider the ‘social’ to mean the individuals’ concern with their society’s past, rather than a ‘collective’ memory.

This project presented both practical, methodological challenges, and theoretical dilemmas, but the single thing that challenged me the most during the process of researching and writing this thesis, was negotiating my position as a white, British student of anthropology. This is hardly a new challenge for ethnographic researchers; negotiating the legacy of colonialism and anthropology’s relationship to it, is part and parcel of any project, but having this knowledge did not make my experience any simpler. I questioned my ability to firstly gain insightful, illuminating data, and equally importantly I agonized over my capacity to articulate my findings fairly and accurately. With the benefit of hindsight, however, it seems that my caution and reflexivity developed strong and fruitful relationships with my participants, and having received feedback from one key participant, I am confident that this thesis has effectively documented a moment in Koorie art-history.

Another key limitation of my research approach is the time frames of many of the revival projects I have observed and written about in this thesis. Much of my research was done after the artefacts themselves had been created – I traced processes back from the finished artefacts with the help of the artists’ hindsight and curators and scholars’ critical insights and comments. This choice of method was a due to the opportunities available at the time, data-rich nature of the existing projects. I am sure

24 In March 2009, the KHT hosted _Wumen balit jindiworaback – come together strong_ which was a skills workshops and conference. The workshops included stone knapping, public art installations, painting masterclasses, traditional weaving and jewellery making. _Wumen balit jindiworaback_ enabled both emerging and established Koorie artists from across Victoria to come together, network, develop new art and culture making skills and be inspired by each other (www.koorieheritagetrust.com). _Wumen balit jindiworaback_ seems to be an appropriate heading for the concluding section of this thesis, which is bringing together all reflections generated thus far, and how they contribute to a renewed kind of social memory.
approaching a revival project from the ‘other end’ would reap various rewards, especially when considering the processes of embodiment and discussions on the nature of knowledge. Ultimately this would have resulted in an entirely different project, and perhaps an avenue for further investigation in the future.

Another challenge this project presented was the temptation to present my participants’ understanding of Koorie history as being something revolutionary; a dramatic change in the way social memories are constructed and experienced. As a researcher, I stepped into a scene at a moment which appeared to be frenetic with activity – a moment when people were excited by the opportunity to access artefacts and texts which had until now been locked away, and which provided a tangible connection between contemporary artists and their histories; a moment of change and development amongst this community of artists and crafts people. But, as stressed throughout this thesis, these revivals of art practices did not emerge from a vacuum; artistic activity, in numerous guises, had been quietly bubbling away under the surface for decades. Having not ‘been there’, prior to the artists’ engagement in these revival practices, it is impossible for me to speculate on how these social memories might have changed, or what form they took before. This thesis has not been a comparison between then and now, or a measurement of change, but simply a record of how, for the duration of my fieldwork, during that finite period of time, the Koorie artists I came across seemed to remember their Koorie history through the processes of making art and reflecting on the nature of time, knowledge and the body.

Of course memories only exist in the present; they are the reflections of the past which can only occur in the fleeting moment of ‘now’. Memory and our experiences of the past, as Connerton explains (1989), determine our experience of the future. Whatever moment of the present one is in, the previous moment always informs how you experience it, thus achieving an ‘objective’ view of the past is, of course, impossible. I have argued one’s unique path through life furnishes one with specific ways of remembering – a constantly changing and emerging prism, through which all one’s previous experiences are refracted. This thesis has argued that the artists’ engagement in craft revival practices, informs this prism through reflections on the nature of time, knowledge and the body. Our experience of the present depends on our knowledge of the past, and we conceptualise the past through notions of time. Time is inextricably linked with the body – people do not think about time in some abstract way but, through bodies, they experience it ‘sensuously and qualitatively’ (Bergson in Urry 1996:45). As Morphy explains, art is a useful gateway into examining the ‘temporality of cultural processes, to connect the experiential dimension of culture, the immediacy of performance with longer term more general processes.’ (Morphy and Perkins 2006:16)

In chapter two, through the artists’ narratives I was able to gain access as to how they express their experiences of time in a multitude of ways. It appeared that time was not only understood as a long
line, stretching back from ‘now’ to ‘then’, but was also a ‘patchwork’ – which managed to collapse this temporal distance.

My concept of ‘patchwork time’ emerged from the discourse and ideas expressed by a small number of Koorie artists when they began engaging with the two nineteenth century possum skin cloaks held at Melbourne Museum. I employed this idea of patchwork time to describe how some of these artists’ experienced a feeling of connectedness with their Ancestors and their Country prior to European settlement, as they physically handled the cloaks, and other culturally significant objects, and through quiet contemplation of the processes and the motifs and markings which decorate them. ‘Patchwork time’ illustrates how the past can be accessed through a multitude of tangible objects, images and landforms which occupy the artists’ lived-in-world. The cloak itself is a useful metaphor to illustrate this idea; the panels of possum pelts, each with its etched decoration related to a time-space, all in existence simultaneously, wrapped around oneself. Time, instead of stretching back along a temporal line, surrounds the artists. The new sets of experiences involved in this making process appeared to inform how the cloak makers ‘remembered’ and conceptualised their cultural history or, at least the way they articulated it. Through their widely syndicated narratives in publications, galleries and conversation, for these artists Koorie ‘social memory’ has changed. Instead of having to negotiate the ‘breaks in the knowledge’, as Maree Clarke described, which interrupt the terrain of the ‘time-line’ spanning the long temporal distance between ‘now’ and ‘then’, the past can be accessed through craft practices and objects which utilises significant material and represent significant places. This experienced connection is understood to be a kind of ‘Ancestral knowledge’. This contributes to a complex of ‘know-how’ which culminates in the skill set and understanding required to recreate these artefacts.

While my ‘patchwork time’ metaphor seems to effectively conjure the spiritual experience of a handful of artists, it must be said that there were others who saw the task of recreating the possum skin cloaks as more of a contemporary art project or political statement. Of course this again highlights that the ideas developed in this thesis are not necessarily transposable to other Koorie individuals or groups. It also leads to questions of how these art works might be understood by both other Community members and members of the wider public. Does a cloak created as a ‘contemporary art project’ (Banks 2008), which, by the artist’s own admission, meant less (ibid) than those crafted by Ancestors with traditional techniques (as it required less labour and ingenuity due to advent of modern tools), appear less authentic than one that was created simultaneously, using similar tools, but whose artists’ felt and artfully described a spiritual connection with their Ancestors? And is that perhaps why these artists’ stories have been found to be noteworthy by curators, authors and researchers, such as myself?
While it is essential to acknowledge, and be mindful of, the potential bias which may have led my research in certain directions and to position my research in light of this, the objective of this thesis has not been to explicitly contemplate the concept of authenticity, but to examine the transmission of cultural knowledge and skills: transposing information from ethnographic records into practical skills, and in a sense almost taking ‘authenticity’ for granted.

Chapter three, meanwhile, examined how Maree Clarke achieved a new kind of knowledge, through the re-construction of a series of kangaroo tooth necklaces, from a nineteenth century photograph. To try and consider the huge philosophical field of ‘knowledge’ in such a short space is, inevitably, problematic. Not least the dissection of the relationship between anthropology and knowledge, ‘anthropological knowledge’ and the layers of interpretation and representation it involves, and my own participation in this process.

As Maree went about her task of making these necklaces, it appeared ‘knowing’ was a practical and continuous activity which she achieved as she engaged with objects, materials and people, and she moved through her world (Harris 2007:1). This transiency of this kind of knowledge also led to consideration of its fundamentally subjective nature; knowledge is not a bounded object which can be handed from one agent to another, but it’s generated through the interactions between them. The processes and interactions between different generations of agents are not enacted from an uncompromising script, and nor is the knowledge possessed by the current generation a facsimile of the knowledge of the generation before.

In this chapter I suggested acquiring a kind of Koorie knowledge involves learning about the parameters of one’s body, the materials, and the surrounding environment. At a critical point during the process of making, these pieces of information are embodied into a ‘way of knowing’. As the environment or materials change, so too do the parameters, and different ‘ways of knowing’ are forged and adapted. Maree choreographed an eclectic range of information into a sequence of movements to produce her necklaces. This saw the transformation of propositional information into something else – into a complete, embodied knowledge.

This, of course, begs the question; if a specific way of ‘knowing’ or making something, is not a precise prescription to which all community members adhere, then what makes that action or product particularly ‘Koorie’? This question could quite easily lead back to a discussion of authenticity and an obsolete scholarly preoccupation with categorising objects and cultures into clear, definitive boxes. It also leads on to discussions about cultural copyright (Brown 1998), and who should, or shouldn’t, be able to produce what, and the frequent subsequent commoditisation of cultural products.
In this thesis I have made no attempt to categorise what constitutes a person ‘Koorie’ - I have simply sought individuals who themselves identify as Koorie recognized as such by the wider Community. While following these paths of ‘authenticity’ and ‘copyright’ would certainly have provided additional depth to this thesis and tackled some relevant political discussion, I avoided disappearing down these rabbit holes in favour of maintaining a clear focus on how revival projects have informed social memories. I tried to keep my eyes trained on the processes, materials and, most importantly, the human bodies involved in these creations, and the discussions and commentary which emerged from them, rather than the external and abstract categories which tend to be discussed and applied after the fact.

Having just hastily backed away from the question of what makes something ‘Koorie’, some of the artists themselves identify and attribute a running thread of ‘Koorieness’, which seems permeate these kinds of revival projects, to their bodily engagement with their Country. The process of bodily enskilment in craft revival has proven to be central to the construction of a new social memory in a number of ways. As the basket weavers in chapter four learnt their skill, they acquired a repertoire of bodily gestures and postures which enabled them to manipulate the grasses in a particular way. These bodily techniques, I have argued, are entirely dependent on the resisting and acquiescing properties of the materials selected. The bodily techniques (as Bourdieu would call *habitus*) are specific to the materials and thus to the Country the materials come from – different grasses thrive in different areas. I have argued that the making of things is not a matter of imposing form on a material, but working within the forces the materials themselves exhibit. Of course this theory falls down somewhat, when modern and synthetic materials are introduced. Knowing how to manipulate a basket out of a bundle of craft raffia does not index where you might come from, or to which cultural group you belong. However in my experience at the weaving workshop, raffia was woven round a skeleton of ‘real’ grass – traditional techniques had been adapted gradually, integrating new materials and gestures. I have argued that the process of embodiment involves a direct connection to Country and the bodily automatisms they display are culturally specific, even when new materials have been adopted.

As numerous artists and colleagues explained to me over the course of my field work, Ancestral knowledge brings about clarity and understanding of Country and the significant cultural practices, such as the crafting of kangaroo tooth necklaces, possum skin cloaks, and baskets, that go on within it. They don’t *believe* in this ancestral knowledge, they *know* it. Learning and reviving these practices result in a renewed connection with Country and a specific cultural knowledge. These practices are not static; the artists have adapted and changed materials and techniques in order for the craft to survive. Sourcing alternative materials is a considered process and is recognised as a necessary compromise to enable continued practice. This highlights the short-comings I alluded to in Bourdieu’s *habitus*, that ‘without this essential reflection and adaptation there would never have been any
cultural change, so ultimately it appears that *habitus* stands for the inertia of social structures, [and] for the persistence of inexorable traditions’ (Roodenburg 2004:224).

Finally, I illustrated the necessary social situating of learning a craft such as weaving through the setting of the *Poong-ort* workshop. The mastery of bodily technique and skill was accompanied by the learning of a story, through constant communication with fellow neophytes and *oldtimers*. The weavers’ understanding of their ‘Koorie-ness’ was achieved by acquiring these stories and weaving skills; understanding and practice unfolded dialogically.

As the artists developed their skills, I too took ventured on a course of apprenticeship. I became a researcher who gathered materials and became familiar with some of their properties (and remain ignorant of many more). I eventually crafted this thesis from these materials which I have teased into one of many possible shapes.

In conclusion, the experiences of the numerous Koorie artists I met during my time in the field involved engagement with traditions which often had not been widely practiced for several generations. By engaging with their environment, the materials, and their Communities in ways necessary to execute such craft practices, they experienced time, knowledge and the role of the body in ways which, to some extent, were liberated from hegemonic conception so prevalent in contemporary Australia. Knowledge, time, and the body are all malleable and emergent, and the memories they appear to generate are too.
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<td>Indigenous Law</td>
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<td>Indigenous peoples</td>
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<td>Non-Indigenous Australians</td>
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<td>Koorie of Koori</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Kulin Nation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Language group</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Native Title</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mooji Lounge</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Possum skin cloak</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stolen Generations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Old People/The Old Ones</strong></td>
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*This glossary was composed with reference to the glossary Museum Victoria produced for the Bunjilaka Center, at Melbourne Museum. (www.museumvictoria.com.au/Bunjilaka)*
## Table of figures

| Fig 1          | Kangaroo tooth necklace sketch by Ruth Oliphant  
A sketch with coloured pencils from photograph (2012) |
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<td>Fig 2</td>
<td>Map of Aboriginal Languages of Victoria, produced by Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (2011)</td>
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Fig. 2
Map detailing Koorie language groups