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ngargee – coming together to celebrate:

## Southeast Australian Aboriginal Art

Edited by Frances Edmonds, Sabra Thorner and Maree Clarke

# Introduction

## **Southeast Australian Aboriginal Art: a living story activating the past in the present for future generations**

**Frances Edmonds, Sabra Thorner and Maree Clarke**

So basically, *this* is what my work is about: passing it on to this next generation ... and watching them grow before your eyes ... it's been an incredible journey ... I get a bit emotional ... because, it's [also] about letting go, and having these guys [my family] carry on ... it's been an amazing few weeks ... laughing and working and different stories being told, it's been fantastic. (Maree Clarke, at Mount Holyoke College, 25 April 2022)

It was late April 2022, Maree was kicking off the last class-meeting of Decolonizing Museums, an upper-level undergraduate seminar at Mount Holyoke College in western Massachusetts, USA.<sup>1</sup> On a table in the centre of the room was a just completed possum skin cloak. Maree Clarke (Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/Boonwurrung) was one of the matriarchs involved in reviving this southeast Australian Aboriginal artistic tradition, and she led the creation of the cloak following an intensive four-week artists' residency (Figure 1). We were all

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<sup>1</sup> 'Decolonising' as a theoretical and methodological frame originated with the pathbreaking work of Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). Mount Holyoke College occupies the land of the Nonotuck, Nipmuck, Mohican and Pocumtuc sovereign nations.

a little emotional, and many of us were video recording with our phones, wanting to hold on to what felt like a very special event, just a bit longer.

Maree, an artist, curator, community activist and, now, matriarch, had come from Australia to take part in this collaborative research and teaching experiment to work towards decolonising the ‘institution’. She was accompanied by her eldest niece, Kerri Clarke (Boonwurrung), and Kerri’s adult children, Mitch Mahoney (Boonwurrung/Barkindji) and Molly Mahoney (Boonwurrung/Barkindji). Through this course (which built on a pilot the year before), we were trying to create a context for non-Indigenous people to engage with Indigenous knowledge systems. We wanted the students to be exposed to a system that is equal to and yet distinct from conventional university ways of knowing, to understand Indigenous knowledge holders as epistemic partners (Marcus and Fischer 1999) in inspiring students’ learning. The artists completed a possum skin cloak and invited students to learn alongside their making processes, making-together as a way of keeping knowledge alive.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The 2022 residency and course, and the 2021 pilot, were supported with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Five Colleges, Incorporated, through the ‘Gathering at the Crossroads’ Native American and Indigenous Studies project (2020–23).



**Figure 1.** Maree Clarke, Kerri Clarke, Mitch Mahoney and Molly Mahoney, *Seven Sisters Cloak*, 2022; possum skins, kangaroo sinew, waxed thread, ochre, acrylic ink, glass beads, and possum tails; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, USA. (Photo: Fran Edmonds)

The cloak told the story of the Seven Sisters, with other designs of creation stories from the southeast joining together the artists' cultural knowledge, artistic practice, and the experience of being in Massachusetts at Mount Holyoke College. Many of the shapes and motifs were inspired by Maree's jewellery which she made together with her brother, Peter Clarke, (Mutti Mutti/Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta/Boonwurrung, 1971-1999) in the late 1980s to 1990s. Since

that time, Maree’s designs have influenced a whole generation of southeast Australian Aboriginal artists, for example, Yorta Yorta woman Jirra Lulla Harvey<sup>3</sup> (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Jirra Lulla Harvey, *Self-determination: Our Community-Our Future-Our Responsibility*, 2004; 2004 National NAIDOC Poster held in the AIATSIS collection.

Maree has described art as the site where ‘Ancestral Memories’ become tangible. Telling stories through art in a contemporary way is a ‘living dialogue between the past and the present’ (Clark 2021). Maya Hodge (Lardil/Yangkaal), Maree’s niece and herself an emerging artist and writer, further explains:

our practices ... are rooted in our sovereign spaces, generational love,  
knowledge and healing practice. My mother, aunties and uncles transferred

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see Clarke et al. 2021.

this to my brother ... my cousins and me, as we continue to honour their legacies through our own ways of creating ... Every mark and every line is an inheritance of over sixty thousand years of generations who have been cultural keepers of law, lore, language, waterways, and care for Country. (Hodge 2022)<sup>4</sup>

Art is a mode of keeping individual memories alive; it is multi-directional and -dimensional in honouring Ancestors by living descendants. Art is also a mode of intercultural communication, exchange and collaboration. As Maree has stated over the years:

Our culture was devastated by colonisation. We lost our land, we were forbidden to speak our languages, we couldn't keep our cultural practices. But art gives us a really good starting point for talking about those things that are so difficult to talk about. (Fran Edmonds, personal communication, 2022)

Activist and academic Gary Foley (Gumbaynggir) has famously said, 'all Aboriginal art is political because it is a statement of cultural survival'<sup>5</sup>. It is, in fact, because of the ongoing impacts of colonisation that Indigenous art-making is an assertion of presence and resilience.

Throughout the 2022 Mount Holyoke seminar and artists' residency, collaborative art-making became a pedagogical strategy, a way for non-Indigenous people to learn about southeast Australian Aboriginal culture. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg)

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<sup>4</sup> 'Country' in this context refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relationships to and responsibilities for land.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Symes and Lingard 1988:209; see also Foley 2005.

views ‘*making* as the material basis for experiencing and influencing the world’<sup>6</sup>. This is premised on the principles and practices of relationality, reciprocity and reflexivity. And Martin Nakata (Torres Strait Islander) argues that Indigenous people know more about working within the Western system than vice versa (Nakata 2007); he calls this the ‘cultural interface’.

Aboriginality has adapted continuously in order to survive the onslaught of colonisation.

Drawing from these scholars’ important work, our teaching was less about Aboriginal culture as a particular thing or set of contents — though the endurance and adaptation of traditions in innovative ways is central to keeping knowledge and culture alive — and more about centring Indigenous ‘ways of knowing, being, and doing’ (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003), and about creating opportunities for non-Indigenous students to be immersed in and to work towards understanding them.

Over the past six years — since we began thinking about this book and collaborating with our contributors — COVID-19 has seen all of our lives impacted in unanticipated and unprecedented ways. Our work and life situations have radically changed — from regularly attending university/college campuses to teach or continue our research, attending art gallery openings and closings, or participating in art fairs and exhibitions, to being contained at home and on Zoom and within very small, confined radiuses of movement. Given these ruptures of the global pandemic, how do we continue connections, stay in relationship, maintain networks? *This* is a central challenge of our times. In the context of this challenge, we emphasise a strengths-based approach,<sup>7</sup> rather than a deficit discourse, in relation to Australian First Nations lived

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added; Simpson 2021:5, 11.

<sup>7</sup> See Watego 2021; Dudgeon et al. 2022.

realities. A strengths-based approach upends the frequent and misleading assumptions that have viewed southeast Australian Aboriginal people as absent, lacking, or inauthentic. A strengths-based approach insists on the southeast Australian Aboriginal art movement as an assertion of resilience.

Much attention has been paid to the art movements in central and northern Australia; less attention has been paid to the continuities and innovations, vibrancy and diversity of art and its makers — knowledge holders, activists, creatives — in southeast Australia.<sup>8</sup> Our definition of southeast Australia includes the earliest invaded regions of the country, encompassing areas now known as the states of New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria and the southeast of South Australia.

Dominant narratives construct ‘authentic’ Aboriginal art as originating in the ‘remote’ communities and cultures of the Western Desert and the Top End. This is a direct consequence of the colonial project: European settlement and occupation of the southeast involved aggressive, violent and persistent efforts to eliminate Aboriginal peoples from their lands. With the rise of First Nations activism and the consolidation of art-making into a movement in the 1980s, a pernicious backlash also arose: Indigenous arts from southeast Australia were deemed ‘inauthentic’ or ‘too political’.

This book recognises the art practice and cultural revitalisation work that Maree Clarke has nurtured and developed for more than thirty years. Maree, along with other leading Aboriginal matriarchs — Dr Vicki Couzens (Keeray Wooroong Gunditjmarra), Lee Darroch

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<sup>8</sup> A few significant precursors to this volume, which remain touchstones in our ongoing projects, include Edmonds 2007; Leslie 2008; Edmonds and Clarke 2009; Keeler and Couzens 2010; and Thorner 2013.

(Yorta Yorta/Mutti Mutti/Boonwurrung), Dr Treaahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta), Kimba Thompson (Wiradjuri) — has forged a stronghold of art practices, initiating new ways of telling old stories, alongside making and exhibiting contemporary artworks that represent the diversity of Aboriginal knowledge and culture. Maree, as an author/editor of, and an inspiration for, this book, is exemplary of, and extraordinary in the trajectory of art-making in the region. In a very short time, she has gone from being relatively unknown to being an internationally recognised phenomenon; her work, her perspectives and her mentoring, and her expertise are now sought across Australia and overseas.

This introduction is divided into three sections. In the first section, we situate ourselves and define our project of writing-together. We emphasise storytelling as an expression of Indigenous sovereignty and assert intercultural collaboration as a strategic intervention into dominant Western ways of knowing. The second section tells a story of diverse and robust Aboriginal arts in Australia's southeast, including the revivification of Ancestral knowledge and continuous innovation. In the third section, we discuss the Living Archive, an ongoing experiment in sustaining these ways of transmitting knowledge. Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing urge us to unlearn colonial linearities and hierarchies, and position relationality as an alternative way of engaging with the world.

## **1 Situating ourselves and defining our project**

### ***Who we are and where we come from***

As three women writing together, our history of collaboration extends over more than twenty years. Throughout that time, our work, including the compilation of this book, has been guided

by Maree Clarke. Maree is a renowned Koorie artist who has lived in Naarm (Melbourne)<sup>9</sup> for more than thirty years; she is leading a matriarchally oriented drive to revitalise Koorie culture via an expansive art and cultural practice. Sabra Thorner is a non-Indigenous USA-based anthropologist who has worked with Koorie people and organisations in southeast Australia for more than twenty years. Frances (Fran) Edmonds is a non-Indigenous Naarm-based interdisciplinary scholar (focusing on anthropology). She has worked with and in Aboriginal communities since the early 1990s, including in remote-area education in the Central Desert, in native title research across the country, and with Maree Clarke researching southeast Australian Aboriginal art practices. We came to know each other mainly through working with the Koorie Heritage Trust, a multifaceted cultural centre in Naarm, where Maree was a long-term curator and Exhibitions Manager (2001–12).

Much of our collaboration has taken place in southeast Australia, and mostly in Naarm. Naarm is the unceded, sovereign territory of the Kulin Nations, which include Boonwurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurung, Wathaurong and Woiwurrung peoples. We acknowledge all First Nations peoples on whose lands we have come together, and we pay our respects to Elders, past and present, and to their descendants. It is important to us that we acknowledge where our knowledge comes from, and the lands and peoples with whom we are in relation.<sup>10</sup> This is an

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Naarm’ is a term shared across the central Kulin Nation. In the Boonwurrung language, it refers to the body of water now known as Port Phillip Bay and its enclosing lands. In the Woiwurrung language, it refers to the lands in what is now known as the Melbourne Central Business District. As Indigenous author/scholar Tony Birch (1992) argued long ago, naming places is a form of declaring and honoring sovereignty.

<sup>10</sup> Liboiron 2021; see also Phillips and Bunda 2018; Kearney and Bradley 2020.

argument, as Wiradjuri academic Sandy O’Sullivan explains, that situates our cultural backgrounds in relation to the research and the communities we are working with, requiring that we ‘remain present rather than distanced, in [our] reporting’ (O’Sullivan 2015:105).

In addition to O’Sullivan (2015), we are inspired by Louise Phillips and Tracey Bunda (Ngugi/Wakka Wakka) (2018), who argue for a matriarchal standpoint in conducting and sharing research (see also Moreton-Robinson 2013). Writing together — each from our own positionalities yet under a shared commitment to this project — is both a methodological and a theoretical intervention in, and a resistance to, colonising and patriarchal structures, systems, practices and processes. While we acknowledge that a book, by its very nature, fixes our words and arguments in place and time, we also urge readers to see this edited volume as an opportunity to consider work and relationships that are complex, dynamic, negotiated and always ongoing.

### ***Storying, co-authorship and decolonisation***

In developing, writing and compiling this book, we are inspired by the concept of ‘storying’ as outlined by Phillips and Bunda in their work *Research through, with and as storying* (2018).<sup>11</sup> They discuss storying — ‘the act of making and remaking meaning through stories’ (Phillips and Bunda 2018:7) — as an embodied process, accessible to all, existing in the everyday and ‘cross[ing] cultures, classes and modes’ (Phillips and Bunda 2018:5). This work resonates with us as co-authors, bringing together culturally diverse yet connected approaches to storying. In

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<sup>11</sup> Storying, as a collective enterprise through which stories and storytelling emerge, is increasingly recognised as a method of knowledge production within academia. In addition to Phillips and Bunda 2018, see Archibald et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2019; Wilson 2008.

this book, each chapter is interculturally co-authored — that is, Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors have come together to write and talk about making and remaking meaning through their experiences with each other, in art worlds and beyond. We were determined to allow space for viewing, interpreting and engaging with multiple and diverse stories, in ways that insist on equitable acknowledgement of different ways of knowing, being and doing; this is integral to the collaborative and intercultural project presented here.

Rather than concentrating on who leads the work, for us it is more appropriate that we acknowledge the diversity of skills, knowledge and experiences reflected in our collaborative storytelling. In other words, ‘knowledge in the story is not owned by one, but many ... [i.e.], there is no one author, but authors’ (Phillips and Bunda 2018: 64). Our work is a continual process of intercultural knowledge exchange — back and forth — through conversations, engaging in art-making (by watching, doing and listening) and often just hanging out together, maintaining friendships and trust, between ourselves and others with whom we engage closely. This collective storying, as Phillips and Bunda (2018:12) assert, speaks ‘back to positivist hierarchical arrogant privileging of what counts as knowledge’, and resists ‘the whiteness and maleness of neoliberal academia’ (2018:65).

Thus, we foreground collective storying, intercultural relationships and knowledge transmission, and we reflexively assert that this is an explicitly political intervention not only in the academy, but also in art worlds and archival and collections spaces. This is an effort, often messy, that is always imperfect.

This messiness intersects with the work of decolonisation. Colonisation is a process, not an event.<sup>12</sup> Decolonisation is not a metaphor.<sup>13</sup> Yet what is the work of decolonising, and is this even the right expression for the theoretical and activist work we seek to do? In this volume, Peter Waples-Crowe (Ngarigo) and Megan Evans (Chapter 1) discuss the need to decolonise our minds, and Zena Cumpston and Rimi Khan (Chapter 5) talk about epistemicide – institutions’ colonisation of Indigenous knowledges and their dispossession of people from their ideas. We know that these processes involve learning as well as *unlearning*, and taking responsibility for ourselves and for doing this work. We suggest that art-making is a genre of decolonising work that seeks to assert Indigenous sovereignty and make it visible to a broader public.

### ***Creative cultural expression, storytelling and sovereignty***

Vicki Couzens favours the phrase ‘creative cultural expression’ (Miekus 2023), which emphasises the embodied connections of First Peoples to their art. In a conversation in October 2004, Couzens stated:

In the old days, before white people came, art wasn’t a separate thing. It was just our life. We lived it; art was all aspects physical, mental, emotional, spiritual; [it was] part of culture and enacted and lived.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This idea is often attributed to Wolfe (1999). More recently, Liboiron (2021:1–37) further argues that ongoing colonial structures are interconnected and destructive, driven by an assumed entitlement to land.

<sup>13</sup> Tuck and Yang 2012; see also Tuck 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Edmonds 2007:126.

Aboriginal people know best how to represent themselves, and there are many ways for their stories to be expressed. Storytelling is an act of self-determination and includes all forms of creative cultural expression: the spoken and written word; artwork; photography; music; and song, dance and other forms of performance.<sup>15</sup> For Indigenous knowledge holders, storytelling in all forms is a culturally safe form of exchange; for non-Indigenous collaborators, storytelling is an opportunity to listen and learn in a mode that is democratic, dialogical and disruptive of colonial power relations. For example, we've included conversations in this volume — see contributions by Julie Gough, Vicki West, Maree Clarke and Fran Edmonds (Chapter 8) and Peter Waples-Crowe and Megan Evans (Chapter 1) — to illustrate how storytelling, listening and learning are reciprocal, even when difficult.

Storytelling is found in the Dreaming, a term which references cosmological connections to specific significant sites on Country and are linked into Ancestral memories.<sup>16</sup> These memories are contained in and revealed through songlines and associated stories (Neale and Kelly 2020). Curator Margo Neale (Wiradjuri/Gumbayngirr) has written that storytelling is a way of holding and transmitting knowledge across time and place. Stories are 'written in the land', the earth, sea and sky; this is the 'archive' from which everything is interconnected.<sup>17</sup> Neale further explains:

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<sup>15</sup> See Barlo et al. 2020; Leane 2016; Wright 2016.

<sup>16</sup> See James (2016:33–45) for one example of the use of the word 'Dreaming', a European interpretation of the central Australian Indigenous word *Tjukurpa* (see also Stanner 1979).

<sup>17</sup> Neale and Kelly 2020:45; see also Gilchrist 2016; Leane and Harkin 2021.

Everything starts and ends with Country in the Aboriginal worldview. Yet there are no endings in this worldview, nor are there any beginnings. Time and place are infinite and everywhere. Everything is part of a continuum, an endless flow of life and ideas emanating from Country, which some refer to as the Dreaming.<sup>18</sup>

Storytelling comes from Country, and storytelling ensures the future of Country. In Australia's southeast, creative cultural expression exemplifies this infinite web of relations, rendering these relations visible and knowable as Indigenous sovereignty.

### ***Defining intercultural collaborations***

In her monograph *Another day in the colony*, Indigenist health humanities scholar Chelsea Watego (Munanjahli and South Sea Islander) writes, 'This is our land and we are not leaving, and neither are the colonisers' (2021:139); and later, 'the act of living demands of us a refusal, a refusal to accept their account of things and a refusal to let them rob us anymore of our joy, our life and our land' (2021:210). Her powerful catchphrase is 'Fuck hope. Be Sovereign' (Watego 2021:212). Watego's central argument is that until colonisers can support sovereignty, hope will not achieve anything. Instead, there must be a present experienced and a future imagined by Aboriginal people, grounded in the truth of sovereignty and not fixated on 'Black death, Black disease, Black dysfunction and Black despair' (Watego 2021:210).

Working towards achieving Indigenous sovereignty demands that non-Indigenous people are also part of the process. Non-Indigenous people must step aside, listen to and make

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<sup>18</sup> Neale and Kelly 2020:1.

space for learning from, working with and being in relation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge holders. Anthropologists Suzi Hutchings and Sarah Holcombe (2022) urge a linguistic shift from ‘allies’ to ‘accomplices’. They argue that allies may inadvertently be ‘part of the problem’, doing ‘salvation’ or ‘missionary work’, potentially ‘seeing victims rather than people’ or ‘co-opting Indigenous issues for their own purposes’. Accomplices, on the other hand, are engaging in decolonising solidarity (see Land 2015) through ongoing dialogue to ensure Indigenous knowledge is embedded in relationships, working alongside communities ‘fighting to build a more equal world’ (Hutchings and Holcombe 2022:226).

In the chapters that follow, teams of co-authors are reckoning and wrestling with ways of telling us about their experiences of working together as collaborators. The etymology of the word ‘collaborator’ is an associate in labour, one who works with another, including the connotations of struggling and exerting oneself. We prefer this to the language of ‘allies’ or ‘accomplices’, and also prefer ‘collaborator’ to ‘co-producer’ for the former’s emphasis on process rather than end-product. Responding to Hutchings and Holcombe’s intervention, we note that this collaborative work is not about propping up colonial systems, nor about valorising the pursuits of individual ‘do-gooders’, but is, instead, about forging positive structural change. This often-challenging labour is — at its core — about positioning Aboriginal knowledges as equal to, yet distinct from, Western knowledges and knowledge-systems (Nakata 2007). It is long overdue and now urgent for non-Indigenous people to understand Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Working-together — in the examples presented in this volume — can shift power dynamics and create possibilities for a more equitable future.

The ‘intercultural’ is not new, and we acknowledge our predecessors in this thinking-space.<sup>19</sup> What is new, however, is our critical and sustained ethnographic attention to the diverse forms that intercultural collaboration takes, our assertion that creative cultural expression is a vital form of knowledge transmission, and our focus on Australia’s southeast.

We adopt a radical reflexivity as we engage with the tensions and conflicts of doing this work — indeed, staying with the trouble is the work (see Haraway 2016). It is hard, it is often uncomfortable and it does not end. We are all embedded in structures of power — colonialism, patriarchy, neoliberalism, capitalism — that precede us and that endure. In response to (and to unsettle) the ongoing and unequal power relations of these structures, we foreground Aboriginal protocols of deep listening and sharing. Our long-term intercultural relationships — forged as friendships — mean that we are still learning from each other, working out ways to deal with difference. Tracey Bunda reminds us that: ‘as Aboriginal people we are not without agency ... [W]e are not sitting around waiting for the white researcher to come and solve our issues’ (Phillips and Bunda 2018:75). The defining principle of our work is ethical engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems, to progress the possibility of intercultural collaboration as a non-hierarchical method for transmitting multiple voices, perspectives, and experiences.

We are interested in how intercultural collaborations — that is, the material relationships and processes of coming together across Indigenous and non-Indigenous origins, kin, community networks, lived experiences — *enable* Indigenous autonomy, Indigenous assertions of sovereignty, and Indigenous creative cultural expression as future-oriented. These relations support and extend Indigenous relationality, in which we are all inextricably

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<sup>19</sup> See Merlan 1998, 2005; Hinkson and Smith 2005; Myers 2004.

interconnected. In other words, collaborating offers possibilities to enact Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing; for non-Indigenous collaborators, this means ensuring we resist colonising paradigms that appropriate Indigenous knowledge and dominate space.

In the chapters that follow, it is almost always institutions (gallery, archive, library, university, museum) or local organisations that offer up the infrastructure necessary to support creative cultural expression. Yet, of course, organisations are made up of individual actors who come with their own standpoints, make their own decisions and take their own actions. Those people must contend with enduring colonial and patriarchal systems and structures too, bureaucracies that prioritise certain idioms of efficiency, compartmentalisation and order. This is related to the intercultural collaborations we foreground: we are ethnographically interested in how people come together through, within and in spite of these systems and structures, and how coming together across difference unsettles them and offers up alternative possibilities.

## **2 Maree Clarke and the story of art in Australia's southeast**

Following concerted efforts by Aboriginal women over the past quarter century, there is now a robust Indigenous arts and cultural scene in Australia's southeast. This book calls attention to the vibrancy and diversity of these forms and practices. The strength and the significance of this art world is a credit to a movement led by activist-artists who are promoting women's knowledge and matriarchal modes of knowledge transmission, ensuring the continuity of First Nations ways of being and meaning-making. This Blak matriarchy<sup>20</sup> — a phrase coined by artist, curator and

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<sup>20</sup> This spelling of 'Blak' was coined by Destiny Deacon (Erub/Mer/Ku'a Ku'a) in her photographic work *Blak Lik Mi* (1991) and exhibition of the same name the following year. Deacon, having had both her Indigeneity

academic Paola Balla (Wemba Wemba/Gunditjmara) — asserts that Australian Indigenous ways of knowing foreground an ethics of generosity and care. Others are brought into the art-making and storytelling processes to ensure knowledge is ongoing (Perković 2018; Balla 2021b).<sup>21</sup> We saw this in action during the collaborative possum skin cloak-making at Mount Holyoke College and, subsequently, at Newcastle High School <sup>22</sup>). These were experiments in decolonising institutions by emphasising Indigenous women’s ways of knowing and transmitting knowledge.

This leadership is intergenerational, from Clarke, Couzens, Darroch, Hamm, and Thompson, to Paola Balla, and now onwards to a new generation that includes Jessica Clark (palawa), Léuli Esrāghi (Sāmoan/Persian/Cantonese), Genevieve Grieves (Worimi), Maya Hodge (Lardil/Yangkaal), Kimberley Moulton (Yorta Yorta), Stacie Piper (Wurundjeri), Hannah Presley, Myles Russell-Cook (Wotjobaluk), Kate ten Buuren (Taungurung) and many more.

The story of art in Australia’s southeast is also, necessarily, entwined with the story of Aboriginal organisations, as increased awareness for Aboriginal self-determination in the second half of the twentieth century grew in response to the continuing neglect of appropriate services for Aboriginal peoples’ health, education, employment, and economic and social wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

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and her femininity denigrated by being called a ‘black c---’, has famously said that she wanted to take the ‘c’ out of ‘black’ (Perkins and Jones 2008:66).

<sup>21</sup> See also Chapter 3 in this volume by Tiriki Onus, Sally Treloyn, Megan McPherson and Reuben Brown.

<sup>22</sup> See **Chapter 7** in this volume by Kate Senior, Richard Chenhall and Daphne Daniels.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Anderson (Trawlwoolway), medical doctor, sociologist/anthropologist and first Indigenous Australian to be appointed as Deputy Vice Chancellor of an Australian university (The University of Melbourne), together with anthropologist and population health scholar Maggie Brady, argued in the mid-1990s that urban-based

During this time, the emergence of Aboriginal organisations was intensely and inherently politicised, as First Nations people around the country mobilised for recognition, social justice and human rights. Their efforts resulted in the 1967 referendum, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987–91) and the overturning of terra nullius (the legal fiction of land belonging to no one), which led to the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth).

In Naarm’s inner north, which was a community hub throughout the mid-twentieth century, community-controlled organisations were founded in response to these policies.<sup>24</sup> These organisations asserted the ongoing existence of Aboriginal people in the region, challenging a general misconception that Aboriginal people from the southeast were already assimilated into the broader population (Broome 2005). The Aborigines Advancement League (founded in 1957), the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (both established in Fitzroy in 1973) were important catalysts for Aboriginal self-determination in Victoria. These places served as precursors to the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT or the Trust),<sup>25</sup>

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Aboriginality, particularly in Victoria, was produced through myriad organisational bureaucracies at community, state and national levels (Anderson and Brady 1995:16–17).

<sup>24</sup> For more on ‘native hubs,’ see Ramirez 2007; also Dowell 2013.

<sup>25</sup> The Koorie Heritage Trust was established in 1985 to protect, preserve and promote the living culture of Aboriginal peoples in southeast Australia. It originated from a legal case for the return of skeletal remains from the Murray Black Collection at The University of Melbourne. Following the Ancestors’ return, KHT grew into a multifaceted cultural and community centre, focused on caring for and sharing culture. While the KHT had a relatively low public visibility at the turn of the 21st century (e.g. it was not mentioned in *The Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture*, Kleinert and Neale 2000), it is now one of the most acclaimed and longest-running Indigenous organisations in Australia. For more, see Thorner 2013; Faulkhead and Berg 2022.

the Torch,<sup>26</sup> Blak Dot Gallery<sup>27</sup> and Footscray Community Arts (FCA).<sup>28</sup> The endurance and strength of these organisations highlight ongoing struggles for the recognition of the contemporaneity of Indigeneity and Indigenous cultural production.

Forging and finding places to make, show and share art was (and continues to be) part of the same activist movement. The Trust, the Torch, Blak Dot and FCA are examples of how people can control their culture and heritage from their own perspectives, facilitating two-way knowledge exchange, where Indigenous knowledge systems are equal to, yet different from, Western knowledge, and where each learn from the other.<sup>29</sup> Both the Trust and the Torch emphasise knowing who you are and where you come from, and offer substantial employment, education and training opportunities. The Torch and Blak Dot respond to issues implicated in the Black Lives Matter movement, the former by directly redressing the effects of Aboriginal over-representation in prisons and in rates of deaths in custody; and the latter in creating a culturally safe space for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) peoples to come together across analogous and different experiences. FCA also foregrounds inclusivity — of CALD

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<sup>26</sup> The Torch was founded in 2011 to address the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in the Victorian criminal justice system. Its mission is to encourage program participants — Indigenous people in prison in Victoria — to explore their identities and cultures through art.

<sup>27</sup> Blak Dot Gallery was launched in 2011 by Kimba Thompson to provide a home for Aboriginal artists and culturally and linguistically diverse peoples to exhibit in a space that is Aboriginal-controlled and embraces cultural diversity.

<sup>28</sup> Footscray Community Arts Centre was founded in 1974, and was renovated and reimagined from 2011 to be a community precinct; it is now known as Footscray Community Arts (FCA).

<sup>29</sup> See Huijser et al. 2015; Watson 2011; Coff and Lampert 2019.

communities, LGBTQIA+ people,<sup>30</sup> differently abled bodies and First Nations languages and cultures — and advocates for diversity in community (see Khan 2015, 2020). All four of these organisations have nourished southeast Indigenous arts practices, enabling relatively unknown arts practitioners to develop and create work that is now highly valued and sought after.<sup>31</sup> The intertwined histories of all of these Indigenous-run organisations and institutions provides important context for what was then an emergent art/activism movement.

From the time Maree Clarke arrived in Melbourne in the late 1980s, she spent many hours at the state museum retrieving southeast Australian Aboriginal Ancestral designs from the collections (Figure 3), searching the database and taking photographs of objects and the people who visited or worked there:

[I] remember, the museum [Museums Victoria] started digitising the collection [around the late 1980s], they had this little tiny computer and they'd digitised quite a few thousand images. For me, to go and physically look at those objects in the cases would have taken months. But, to sit there

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<sup>30</sup> This is an evolving acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual, and the plus-sign symbolises inclusivity of other terms for sex and gender identifications (such as non-binary or pansexual).

<sup>31</sup> For more on Aboriginal art as 'high art', see Myers 2002; for more on 'regimes of value', see Myers 2001. Vivien Anderson Gallery, a respected private gallery in Melbourne, has also been a force in ushering in this shift. The gallery represents, promotes and facilitates the ethical acquisition of diverse Indigenous artworks from First Nations artists across Australia including southeast artists Maree Clarke, Hayley Millar Baker (Gunditjmara/Djabwurrung), Kent Morris (Barkindji), James Tylor (Kaurna Miyurna) and Vicki West (Trawlwoolway).

and in one day look at 10,000 images, just by clicking on a little button, that was amazing. So, it was from there it kickstarted ...

I would just come in and hang out with [museum curators] Valmai [Heap, Yorta Yorta] or Gaye [Sculthorpe] or Melanie [Raberts], and just go behind the scenes and have a look at our artefacts and things, and the old museum pieces. All the researching led to my designs onto shields and seeing Victorian objects alongside other objects ... I'm just so happy I took the photos.<sup>32</sup>



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<sup>32</sup> Maree Clarke, personal communication with Fran Edmonds and Lindy Allen, former curator Museums Victoria, Indigenous collections, February 2020.

**Figure 3:** Maree Clarke inspecting items held in the collections of the Melbourne Museum in 2002 as part of the ‘Gib Me Bak My Pitcha’ project. Maree researched the designs on Victorian shields, stone carvings, engraved possum skin cloaks and boomerangs in order to encourage Indigenous artists to use culturally specific iconography and reconnect with their cultural heritage. (Photo: Ponch Hawkes and City of Melbourne)

Accessing the collections and working with museum staff profoundly influenced Maree’s practice and has grown into a purposeful methodology of object-based research in museums worldwide to locate, record and revitalise Ancestral knowledge as contemporary expressions of culture.<sup>33</sup>

Maree was employed as exhibitions manager at the Koorie Heritage Trust in 2001 and began to substantially influence work to promote southeast Australian Aboriginal arts — a role which paralleled a shift in attitudes towards southeast Aboriginal art more generally.<sup>34</sup> Maree’s long-term dedication to southeast Aboriginal cultural practices has also been integral in the development of artworks and other organisations and predates her employment at the Trust. She was an emerging artist in the 1980s in her

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<sup>33</sup> For more on the revitalisation of possum skin cloak-making via research in museum collections, see Reynolds et al. 2005.

<sup>34</sup> In 2001, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre opened as the First Peoples’ gallery at a newly (re)designed flagship campus of Museums Victoria, the Melbourne Museum. The histories of Indigenous representations at the state museum are beyond the scope of this volume (for more, see Rasmussen 2001). Through the establishment of Yulendj, an Indigenous community reference group, and the hosting of events such as the funeral of Elder Len Tregonning (Gunnai) in January 2017, Bunjilaka works hard to be a hub for community support and representation.

hometown of Mildura, in the far northwest of Victoria, when the Trust co-founder Jim Berg (Gunditjmara) started collecting jewellery, featuring Koorie designs, made by her and her brother Peter Clarke (Figure 4)<sup>35</sup>. Note the continuities of design motifs between the jewellery, the poster in Figure 2, the cloak in Figure 1, and the shield in Figure 12. The jewellery is now part of the Trust's substantial collection of earrings, necklaces and artworks made by the Clarke family (see also Figures 5 and 6). While at the Trust, Maree supported Kent Morris and many others as emerging artists and curators; Kent would go on to become Chief Executive Officer of the Torch.



AH 00116



AH 00131



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<sup>35</sup> Maree's jewellery was initially sold through the Aboriginal arts enterprise Kiah Krafts she established together with Peter as well as her sister Karen Clarke-Edwards in Mildura. For more, see Edmonds 2021:20.

AH 01119

AH 03565

**Figure 4.** Maree Clarke, earrings and brooch (bottom right), 1987–1993, painted balsa and found wood; Koorie Heritage Trust collection, Victoria. (Photos: Christian Capurro)



**Figure 5a.** The work in progress of creating the 3D-printed jewellery series ‘Thung-ung Coorang’ at artist Blanche Tilden’s studio in 2018, commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria. In the centre left is Maree Clarke’s *Thung-ung Coorang* (kangaroo teeth necklace), kangaroo teeth, leather, sinew, ochre, 2013. (Photo courtesy of Maree Clarke)



**Figure 5b.** 3D-printed jewellery from the ‘Thung-ung Coorang’ collection, inspired by Maree’s revitalisation of kangaroo teeth necklace-making (for more, see Thorner 2019). (Photograph courtesy of Maree Clarke)



**Figure 5c.** 3D-printed jewellery from ‘Thung-ung Coorang’ with crow feathers, echidna quills and various seeds. (Photo: Daniel Herrmann-Zoll, courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria)



**Figure 6.** Kylie wearing *Kylie*. Maree’s niece, Kylie Clarke, wears a necklace named after her, from a jewellery series called Maram Barerererunger – Wearing Country, a collaboration

between Maree Clarke and Blanche Tilden. (Photo courtesy of Vivien Anderson Gallery and Maree Clarke)

Before her time at the Koorie Heritage Trust, Maree was employed as the first Koorie Arts Officer at the Port Phillip City Council. In that capacity, she worked together with Kimba Thompson on the landmark 1996 *We Iri, We Homeborn* exhibition, which featured more than 100 artists from across Victoria and launched the careers of many, including Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch (Edmonds and Clarke 2009: 38). This exhibition was also an opportunity for Jim Berg at KHT and Judith Ryan, then Senior Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Victoria,<sup>36</sup> to collect Indigenous artists' works. Kimba went on to found Blak Dot Gallery, which has featured many works across multiple forums by Maree's (as well as Vicki Couzens') nieces, nephews and other family and community members.

Maree has also been closely involved with FCA, where she has mentored emerging artists and curated exhibitions as an extension of a longstanding public art practice. Recent projects include the community-making of the FCA Elders cloak in 2012, and the development of a ten-metre long community-fashioned eel trap in 2019, in collaboration with her great-nephew, Mitch Mahoney<sup>37</sup> (Figure 7).

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<sup>36</sup> Ryan held the position of Senior Curator, Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Victoria, for a remarkable forty-four years (1977–2021).

<sup>37</sup> Edmonds et al. 2020; see also [Chapter 6](#) in this volume, by Mitch Mahoney and Amélie Ward.



**Figure 7.** Maree photographing the eel trap work in progress made in collaboration with Mitch Mahoney, for Disposable, Footscray Community Arts, Melbourne in 2019. (Photo: Fran Edmonds)

Maree has been an instigator and an inspiration in making visible the ongoing presence and relevance of Ancestral memories via diverse creative cultural expressions, and insisting on these as a mechanism to share Indigenous knowledges. This is significant, ongoing activist work countering Indigenous marginalisation in this region of Australia. Maree's work in the arts in Australia's southeast is implicated in many other stories; it involves organisations and charismatic leaders and is embedded within families and community-based activism. This is all emphatically based in place, to which we now turn.

### *Naarm is Country*

While Maree has advocated strongly for Aboriginal creatives in the southeast, this work has not been without challenges, especially in the contested space that has been referred to as 'urban

Aboriginal art'. Paraphrasing curator Djon Mundine (Bundjalung), artist, curator and academic Brenda L. Croft (Gurindji/Malngin/Mudburra) has declared, 'There's no such place as urbania' (Croft 2009). 'Urban Aboriginal art' arose as a category in the 1980s to assert an alternative artform equivalent in value to the acrylic and bark paintings originating in the Western Desert and Arnhem Land, respectively. Mundine and Croft ultimately rejected this terminology for the ways it was later used to implicitly condemn 'urban Aboriginal artists' as too politicised, too critical of Australia's colonial history, and too removed from traditional Aboriginal culture, language, and kinship connections. Aboriginal artists living and working in cities found themselves dispossessed in multiple intersecting ways. Forced off their lands (or children stolen from their parents), these artists were invalidated as 'not Blak enough,' and the art they were producing, therefore, second-rate or inauthentic (Fink 1999).<sup>38</sup>

In 2004 Kimba Thompson and Maree Clarke responded to this dilemma by staging the first of three exhibitions entitled *Urbaninity*. The title riffed on the neologism 'urbania' by debunking the myth that Aboriginal people 'living in urban environments ... have lost a community connection or ... have no culture' (Thompson and Clarke 2004:3). Each of the exhibitions (2004–06) represented Indigenous artists living and working in Victoria, including artists with cultural connections to Victoria, alongside those whose connections lay elsewhere. This reflected Thompson and Clarke's belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from outside the region, who had forged long-term art careers in Victoria, also contributed to the progression of the Naarm/Melbourne Aboriginal arts scene and to expressions of Indigeneity and

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<sup>38</sup> For a Sydney-based history that speaks to these trends and includes the origins of Boomalli Aboriginal Artists'

Cooperative in 1987, see Thorner 2013; Croft 1999.

diversity in the southeast.<sup>39</sup> The Urbaninity exhibitions celebrated the diversity of Indigenous art produced throughout the state, from contemporary design and craftwork to the explicitly controversial.<sup>40</sup> Urbaninity 2 (curated by Thompson with input from Clarke) was held in conjunction with the inaugural Victorian Indigenous Arts Awards, staged annually between 2005 and 2015. This assisted in creating expectations for ongoing award programs to foster and support Aboriginal artists across the spectrum, from emerging to established. Today, the annual Koorie Art Show, hosted by the Koorie Heritage Trust, continues to be the only annual awards program dedicated to showcasing the work of Koorie and Victoria-based First Nations artists.

Because of the work of Maree and fellow Blak matriarchs, and through the support and infrastructure of the Koorie Heritage Trust, Blak Dot, the Torch, FCA and other organisations, Naarm is embedded in a network of relations in which unceded Indigenous sovereignty is asserted through creative cultural expression across the southeast. All artists are always embedded in Country, and Naarm is Country (Figure 8).

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<sup>39</sup> State borders are a colonial imposition. Aboriginal language groups (and their Countries) flow across these lines. Yet Aboriginal art from Victoria also makes sense as an entity because of community-based activism, funding streams, and infrastructural support that operate through state governments and community organisations.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, in 2006, an artwork by Brian McKinnon (Noongar/Amangu, d. 2023) was removed from Urbaninity 3, held at Victoria's Parliament House in Melbourne. The painting, titled *King Little Johnny*, which commented on then-Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations, was deemed too overtly political, reinforcing the colonial imperative to restrict Aboriginal voices lest they upset the general public and, more specifically, the politicians who worked in Parliament House (ABC News 2006).



**Figure 8.** Maree Clarke collecting river reeds on Country at the Maribymong River with the Naarm cityscape in the background in 2019. Maree’s great-nephew Mitch Mahoney is in the background. (Photo courtesy of Maree Clarke)

Following on from Thompson and Clarke’s assertions regarding Victoria (and Naarm specifically) as an Indigenous arts hub that has benefitted from the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from around Australia, we continue to argue for the diversity of knowledges that people bring to the place. We also argue that this is dynamic: people shift between country and city, between different places they may feel differently connected to, and they forge different relationships with people from other regions to take on new ways of doing things (for example, see Chapter 7, this volume). We saw this in action during the Mount Holyoke College artists’ residency and possum skin cloak-making, and Kerri Clarke has said often that the Seven Sisters Cloak belongs in that place — that is, South Hadley, Massachusetts — where it was made (Sabra Thorner, personal communication, 2022).

The changes that have occurred in the promotion of southeast Australian Aboriginal arts have led to recognising the importance of ongoing community-based artwork as reflected in the exhibitions, workshops, and gatherings supported by the previously mentioned organisations. In response to the increased awareness of Aboriginal arts in the southeast, Vicki Couzens' 'creative cultural expression' formulation signals both an engagement with and a disruption of conventional art worlds. On one hand, artists have to survive, and often reflexively participate in the markets, commodification, and prestige that art worlds offer. On the other hand, art worlds offer a platform for truth-telling (see Chapter 8 in this volume). Acknowledging this complexity is a dramatic shift from a generation ago, when anthropologists Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson (1989:1) dismissively wrote that the 'number of Aboriginal artists in the cities is still small, and in both quantity and quality their work, on average, does not compare with that of people from more remote areas'. Compared with these limited understandings from the 1980s, southeast Australian Aboriginal arts (with Naarm as a hub) are increasingly seen and celebrated. Through this book, we want to reveal that story and amplify this movement.

### ***Activism, exhibitions and defying categories: curating for Country***<sup>41</sup>

One of the main advocates for promoting and producing artwork unique to southeast Australia was Lin Onus (1948–1993, Yorta Yorta). Onus mobilised his artwork in combination with his activism to advocate for better recognition of Aboriginal rights and social justice, including through his involvement in the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne from the 1970s.

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<sup>41</sup> 'Curate' in English comes from *curare*, the same Latin root as the English verb 'to care for.' Here, 'curating' is about caring for Country and caring for culture.

In the 1980s, he was the Victorian representative (from 1986) and later the Chair (1989–92) of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. His artwork was among the first of southeast Australian Aboriginal artists to be collected by major Australian galleries, including the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the 1990s.<sup>42</sup>

In the mid-1980s, when the Aborigines Advancement League sought to showcase the history and continuing presence of Aboriginal people in the city, Lin Onus, and others at the league, guided a young non-Indigenous art teacher, Megan Evans to design a large-scale public artwork, the Northcote Koorie Mural. The mural remains an icon in Melbourne's inner north. Lin Onus ultimately mentored many Aboriginal artists in the southeast, including Ray Thomas,<sup>43</sup> similarly encouraging them to learn more about the designs and markings that were specific to their cultural heritage.

Maree Clarke worked alongside Megan Evans at the Wyndham Art Gallery in Melbourne's outer west from 2015-2019. They both encouraged young and emerging artists from the area, many from African refugee and multicultural backgrounds, and developed critically acclaimed exhibitions in a region where there have been few opportunities for CALD communities to participate in the arts (see Khan 2020). Megan Evans continues to work alongside Koorie artists (see Chapter 1 in this volume).

Creative cultural practice in the southeast is deeply relational (a concept we return to below). Maree's mentoring of the next generations of practitioners has begun to usher in substantial change in knowledge-making institutions such as galleries, universities and museums

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<sup>42</sup> Neale 2000; see also First Peoples — State Relations 2019; and Chapter 3, this volume.

<sup>43</sup> See Edmonds 2012; Leslie 2008; Victorian Collections nd.

(see Araluen 2017). As we alluded to above, artist and academic Paola Balla has been inspired and guided by Maree at various points in her art-making and curatorial practices. Together with Australian Centre for Contemporary Art director Max Delany, Balla co-curated the groundbreaking exhibition *Sovereignty* in 2016–17.<sup>44</sup> *Sovereignty* was built on a ‘consultative, collaborative curatorial model’ (Balla and Delany 2016:7) and signalled the institution’s commitment to dynamic and ‘enduring engagement with First Nation artists, their cultural practices and creative communities’ (Balla and Delany 2016:10). Extending the exhibition’s thoughtful public programming, the Victorian state government launched *Yalingwa* in 2017, an initiative designed to develop and support the careers of First Nations artists and curators. Guest curatorial positions have been held by Hannah Presley, Stacie Piper, and Jessica Clark, and artist fellowships held by Destiny Deacon, Yhonnie Scarce (Kokatha/Nukunu) and Maree Clarke.<sup>45</sup>

Groundbreaking initiatives in decolonising curatorial practices extend beyond Naarm. Based at Flinders University in Adelaide (Kaurana Country), the Unbound Collective — comprising four artists, Ali Gumillya Baker (Mirning), Natalie Harkin (Narungga), Simone Ulalka Tur (Yankunytjatjara) and Faye Rosas Blanch (Yidniji/Mbarbarm) — is also working creatively to decolonise arts, exhibition, and curating.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Balla and Delany 2016; see also Thorner et al. 2018.

<sup>45</sup> For more, see ACCA nd.

<sup>46</sup> See Baker 2014; Baker et al. nda, ndb; Edgar 2014; Flinders University nd. Further, these artists have all

performed their work at the biennial Tarnanthi Festival, the national Aboriginal Art Fair held in

Tantanya/Adelaide in association with the Art Gallery of South Australia. The festival is curated by Barkandji

Curatorial interventions are not limited to exhibition spaces. Within a few years of Sovereignty and the Unbound Collective forging new curatorial paradigms, Ali Gumillya Baker and Paola Balla collaborated on the December 2021 issue of *Artlink*, which included diverse contemporary Indigenous cultural expressions, for a special edition entitled *Visualising Sovereignty*.<sup>47</sup> *Artlink* is a respected quarterly magazine that has promoted the diversity of Aboriginal artists since its inception in the 1980s, including an annual Indigenous issue from 2010.

Creative cultural interventions into major knowledge-generating and -collecting institutions are now multimodal and multi-sited. Within universities, several robust centres of Indigenous life have been established to be culturally safe and decolonising of the academy. For instance, Moondani Balluk at Victoria University, Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab at Monash University<sup>48</sup> and the Wilin Centre at the Victorian College of the Arts within the University of Melbourne<sup>49</sup>. Increasingly, these spaces are supporting First Nations artists, such as Balla, Vicki Couzens, Brenda L. Croft, Jonathan Jones (Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi) and Julie Gough (Trawlwoolway), and archivists, such as Shannon Faulkhead (Koorie), Kirsten Thorpe (Worimi), Narissa Timbery (Yuin) and Lauren Booker (Garigal). All of these artists and archivists have

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artist Nici Cumpston, sister of Zena Cumpston (see chapter 5). Maree Clarke has been a featured artist in two Tarnanthi Festivals, 2015 and 2022 (AGSA, nd).

<sup>47</sup> Baker and Balla were inspired by Tuscarora artist/art historian Jolene Rickard (see Rickard 2017, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> See Chapter 4, this volume.

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 3, this volume.

earned doctorates, bringing community needs into institutions to make dramatic change from within.

The National Indigenous Arts Triennial at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra, has been a pivotal program in decolonising curating and exhibition from within national galleries and museums too. Croft was the inaugural curator of *Culture Warriors* (2007), following curatorial positions at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA, Perth) and NGA. Tina Baum (Gulumerrgin (Larrakia)/Wardaman/Karajarri), who wrote the Foreword to this edited volume, curated *Defying Empire* (2017), which featured some of Maree's work.<sup>50</sup> Tina is the current Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at NGA.<sup>51</sup>

Specifically in Melbourne, a younger generation of curators including Kimberley Moulton (former Senior Curator, First Peoples, Melbourne Museum / Associate Artistic Director of Rising Festival) and Myles Russell-Cook (Senior Curator of Australian and First Nations Art at the National Gallery of Victoria) are shifting where and how Indigenous cultural expressions are shared with various Australian and international publics. Russell-Cook curated Maree Clarke: *Ancestral Memories*, held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2021–22 (Figure 9), the institution's first solo exhibition by a living female Aboriginal artist with Ancestral connections to Naarm/Melbourne and a major retrospective of Clarke's work (see Russell-Cook 2021). There

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<sup>50</sup> For more, see Chapter 8, this volume.

<sup>51</sup> The other triennials have been *unDisclosed* (2012), curated by Carly Lane (Murri), currently at the AGWA; and *Ceremony* (2022), curated by Hetti Perkins (Eastern Arrernte/Kalkadoon), former longtime curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. For more on Indigenous curatorial methodology as embodied and embedded in place, see Lane 2020.

has been a palpable and dramatic shift in attitudes and sensibilities: curators are making interventions across myriad colonial institutions; First Nations arts of the southeast are now celebrated across genres, including as high art; and women are at the vanguard of creativity, activism, and innovation like never before (Carmichael 2020).



A. Maree Clarke, *Ancestral Memory i and ii*, 3-metre glass eel traps, 2019, glass and wire, with *Ritual and Ceremony* in background, photographs, 2012.



**B.** Maree Clarke, kopi mourning caps in foreground, plaster of Paris, c. 2011, with *Ritual and Ceremony* in background.

**C.** Maree Clarke, selection of kangaroo teeth necklaces, kangaroo teeth, leather, sinew, ochre, 2018, with *Ritual and Ceremony* in background.

**Figures 9A, B, C.** Various images of Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories exhibition, NGV, 2021–22.

(Photos: Tom Ross)

### *Expressions of the metatemporal: stories across time and place*

Aboriginal art is perhaps the only genre of creative expression that is displayed simultaneously across ethnographic museums and fine art galleries, creating new ways of seeing and understanding what ‘art’ is and could be, driven by an Indigenous worldview.<sup>52</sup> As curator

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<sup>52</sup> See Gilchrist 2020; Poll and Harris 2021; Morphy 2011.

Stephen Gilchrist (Yamatji) has observed, Aboriginal art is ‘everywhen’; it is metatemporal, a reflection of the ‘eternal present’, never-ending, at once ancient and contemporary, twisting time to challenge chronological art histories.<sup>53</sup> The metatemporality of Aboriginal art and art-making is evidenced through Maree’s work in museums in Australia and Europe to access her Ancestral artefacts, uncover their memories, and reclaim them as contemporary artworks. As an artist, Maree’s work interrogates archives and museum collections, and challenges the idea of the past and present as separate entities. These interventions require museums to rethink how objects and records might be sustained and made accessible for future generations.<sup>54</sup> In 2011–12, Maree undertook a research and residency trip to Europe; we provide three examples of her encounters with museums that illustrate the idea of Aboriginal art as metatemporal.

### **Kopi caps in Italy**

An early iteration of Maree’s kopi caps installation was exhibited in *Dreamtime: lo spirito dell’arte aborigena* (Born from the Dreaming: Aboriginal Art and Culture), held at the MAN (Museo d’Arte Provincia di Nuoro), Sardinia, Italy (11 February – 28 August 2011).<sup>55</sup> The exhibition consisted mainly of Aboriginal art from the private collection of Hans Sip,<sup>56</sup> and was

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<sup>53</sup> Gilchrist 2016 :19; see also Carroll 2017.

<sup>54</sup> See Janke and Company nd; Janke 2021.

<sup>55</sup> For recent commentary by Maree on her kopi cap work, including various kopi exhibitions, community-based kopi making workshops (where people create their own mourning caps while working through their sorrow and grief), alongside her highly regarded photographic series of Aboriginal people in mourning, see Carroll 2024.

<sup>56</sup> Hans Sip is an Australian art collector; this exhibition included his collections from the southeast, as well as several acrylic-on-canvas paintings from Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land, most never before exhibited

co-curated by Maree and Amanda Jane Reynolds (Guringai).<sup>57</sup> Responding to her research into the burial ceremonies of her Ancestors (Allen 2010), Maree created contemporary interpretations of kopi caps worn by people in mourning along the rivers of northern Victoria and southern New South Wales, including Dungala (the Murray) and Barka (the Darling).<sup>58</sup> Made from plaster of Paris, each cap was perched behind a screen of eucalyptus branches, a response to the ritual wooden burial platforms where mourners gathered (see Figure 10 and also Figure 9B). The branches were collected by Maree from a nature strip near the MAN, as strict quarantine laws prevented them being brought from Australia into Italy. Eucalypts were one of many plant species taken from Australia from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to Europe as examples of the exotic flora and fauna of the so-called new world.<sup>59</sup> As trees indigenous to Australia and introduced to Sardinia because of their environmental adaptability, they exemplify a colonial imperative to collect and classify, while denying Indigenous peoples' knowledge of and claims to Country. Maree's installation reinforced her Ancestral connections to Country, while her retrieval of eucalyptus branches recontextualised the trees as living things connected to her people and

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internationally (Aboriginal Exhibitions Gallery nd). Digitised copies of the Ngukurr artworks have been donated to the Living Archive project (see Chapter 7, this volume, for more on the longstanding interconnections and exchanges between Indigenous artists in southeast Australia and southeast Arnhem Land).

<sup>57</sup> For more, see Clarke and Reynolds 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Kopis were originally made from natural gypsum and weighed up to 7 kilograms. For more, see Ryan 2021; and Chapter 6, this volume.

<sup>59</sup> For concrete examples of plant and animal material taken from Australia during early European explorations of the continent, and Aboriginal artists' and writers' responses to these, see O'Callaghan 2023.

culture. This work is an expression of an ‘ontological relationship’ to Country, in which Maree is inextricably linked, despite being away from home (Moreton-Robinson 2015:13).



**Figure 10.** Maree Clarke with her installation of kopi caps, eucalyptus branches and *Ritual and Ceremony*, photographs, at the MAN museum in Nuoro, Sardinia, Italy in 2011. (Photo courtesy Maree Clarke)

### **Researching collections overseas**

In 2011, Maree spent time researching her Ancestral collections at the British Museum (London) and the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) in the United Kingdom; at the Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography at the Museo delle Civiltà (Rome) and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (University of Florence) in Italy; and at the Vatican Ethnological Museum in Vatican City. Her research led to a three-month artist’s residency at Monash University’s campus in Prato, Italy, in 2012, during which time she visited the Florence museum, which holds two glass cabinets full of early Australian material culture. One avid collector, who

contributed significantly to the Florence museums ethnographic collection and cataloguing methodology, was Italian zoologist Enrico Hillyer Giglioli, who visited southeast Australia in the mid-nineteenth century. While his collection from Australia was later sold by his family to the Pigorini museum in Rome,<sup>60</sup> his influence regarding the exhibiting of objects in the museum remains today.

Giglioli's research intersected with 'scientific' ambitions to study and map the diversity of humankind (Bigoni and Barbagli 2022). His work contributed to fallacious ideas of a hierarchy of human peoples and civilisations, which constructed Aboriginal Australians at the evolutionary origins of the human species (Lydon 2015). Like the accumulation of botanical specimens (such as the eucalyptus trees mentioned above), Giglioli's work is representative of the collecting frenzy that occurred through the mid-twentieth century. Objects in the Florence museum are exhibited in 'cabinets of curiosities' arranged according to type, and are alienated from their stories and the people who made them (Aigner 2015) (Figure 11).<sup>61</sup> During her Prato residency, Maree created seven new acrylic-on-canvas artworks, which responded to the Florence collection and its problematic display (Figure 12).<sup>62</sup> This provided a 'creative narrative'

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<sup>60</sup> Francesca Bigoni, Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, University of Florence, email with Fran Edmonds, February 2024.

<sup>61</sup> For more on Indigenous Australian collections held in Italian museums (as well as nascent efforts from within the institutions to engage with appropriate knowledge holders), see Galassi 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Building on this important intervention, in March-April 2024, Maree was invited back to Florence to take up a residency at the Murate Art District (MAD) and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, University of Florence. This residency saw her work with students to create three new 50 metre river reed necklaces using reeds collected from the Arno River. These were included in an exhibition of her work installed between MAD

that strove to renew the voice of the objects (Bigoni and Barbagli 2022:14), including a shield with linear design work collected from the Murray River (Dhungala) region, circa 1888.<sup>63</sup> Maree's work in Florence also built on the revivification of her Ancestral designs from her earlier research at Museums Victoria, reinforcing the contemporaneity of Aboriginal culture and the ongoing presence of southeast Australian Aboriginality for future generations:

I think everything is inspired by collections in some way, not just one collection, it comes from seeing many objects from southeast Australia in many collections. The designs I created in the late 1980s on my early shields and jewellery are now designs that I share with my family as our collective designs.<sup>64</sup>

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and the Museum, where large-scale individual images of her black and white photographs of Men in Mourning and Women in Mourning, alongside her river reed histology images from her work 'Now you see me seeing the invisible' (see front cover), were projected onto the medieval buildings.

<sup>63</sup> In March-April 2024, Maree will revisit the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology at the University of Florence to conduct another residency and hold workshops involving the reclamation of her Ancestral material through contemporary art practice.

<sup>64</sup> Maree Clarke, personal communication, Fran Edmonds, December 2022; cf Clarke 2009.



**Figure 11.** Cabinet of Curiosities, 'Australia', Museo Nazionale di Antropologia e Etnologia, Firenze (National Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, Florence, Italy). (Photo: Fran Edmonds, 2024, reproduced courtesy of the Museal System of the University of Florence)



**Figure 12.** Maree Clarke, *Connections to Country*, acrylic on canvas showing Clarke family design, painted during her Prato residency in 2012. (Photo: Maree Clarke)

### **A textile cloak: adapting possum skin cloak-making to local contexts**

Enrico Giglioli was an avid photographer and his photographic collections include images of Yorta Yorta people from the Echuca and Moama regions (northern Victoria and southern New South Wales) dressed in possum skin cloaks (Lydon 2015). His photographs remain in the

Pigorini museum in Rome (Aigner 2015). Maree’s knowledge of possum skin cloak-making — enhanced by viewing Giglioli’s photographs — led to a series of two weekend workshops held at the Museo del Tessuto (Textile Museum) in Prato.<sup>65</sup> Maree’s previous work to revitalise Ancestral knowledge through possum skin cloak-making was adapted to engage with the region’s renowned historical connections to textile-making, which originated in the twelfth century. By the twenty-first century, this industry had been impacted by rapid socio-economic and technological changes, affecting traditional skills and knowledge. The idea of making a textile cloak arose in response to the Prato community’s ambitions to revivify traditional textile-making as a way to transmit knowledge and culture (Figure 13). The collaborative making process reached across cultures, language and social barriers, and enlivened practices associated with the textile industry, as storytelling about Prato textiles was interwoven with Maree’s possum skin cloak-making knowledge and stories. The workshops provided space for people to learn together where Indigenous knowledge was central rather than peripheral.<sup>66</sup> This intercultural exchange and making-together reveals the contemporaneity of Indigenous knowledge and overrides ‘scientific’ hierarchies of civilisations.

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<sup>65</sup> For more on photographs as archives themselves, holding knowledge that can be reactivated in new arts/cultural expressions, see Thorner 2019.

<sup>66</sup> See Smith et al. 2019; Coff and Lampert 2019; Edmonds et al. 2022a.





**Figure 13.** Making of a textile cloak in Prato, Italy in 2012. (Photos courtesy Maree Clarke)

### **3 The Living Archive, Relationality, and (the inextricability of) Cultural and Ecological Sustainability**

#### ***Relationality***

Maree's ongoing and diverse practice reflects the metatemporality of Indigenous knowledge; art-making and storying transcend linear notions of past, present and future, and the traditional and contemporary. These are all relational and embodied practices.

Relationality is an Indigenous ontology, a central paradigm of Indigenous knowledge systems that seeks to ensure the interconnectedness of all human and non-human beings with their Country, Ancestors, histories, languages, and knowledges (Moreton-Robinson 2017). Kim Tallbear (2016), Indigenous scholar from Turtle Island / North America (enrolled, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate; and descended from Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma), proposes ‘making kin’ as an alternative to settler-colonial violence. This is an entreaty to be in-relation with one another and conduct these relationships with respect, responsibility, generosity, and reciprocity. Our collaborative book project is an attempt to survey how kinship relationships are made visible through creative cultural expression.

This starts from the actual work of transmitting knowledge within First Nations families (Figure 14). We’ve noted already the idea of a ‘Blak Matriarchy’ in Maree’s transmission of art practices and knowledge to her nieces and nephews and beyond; and Vicki Couzens’ work with her children and grandchildren. Further on, we discuss Jonathan Jones’ analysis of designs across four generations of men. See also Chapter 3 in this volume, in which Tiriki Onus reveals the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission, from his artist-activist grandfather Bill Onus and father Lin Onus, onwards through his own practice to his own child. There are many examples beyond this book. This extends in time — both backwards for millennia and forwards in a way that is never-ending.



**Figure 14.** Maree Clarke, *Long Journey Home*, photo series, 2021, with Mitch Mahoney and Nicholas Hovington (palawa), *River Reed Canoe*, river reeds, string, 2021. Front row left to right: Sonja Hodge, Kerri Clarke, Matari Clarke, Maree Clarke, Molly Mahoney, Maya Hodge. Back row left to right: Alice Clarke, Sharni Karpany-Thomas, Kylie Clarke, Evie Clarke, Eunice Sabanovic, Indi Clarke, Jacob Clarke, Aaron Clarke, Peter Clarke. Production team: Lucy Foster and Kenneth Suico. (Photo courtesy of Maree Clarke)

Relationships are also at the core of intercultural collaboration. In this collection of co-authored contributions, we — along with other First Nations and non-Indigenous academics,

artists, curators, archivists and other makers — are writing together to learn from each other and to progress opportunities, dialogues and experiences as they exist within the intercultural spaces where we work. Despite our differences, we acknowledge the interconnectedness of all things: people, places, things, Country. Good relationships are kinship-based, and are entwined with sustainability, in the contexts of both climate change and cultural continuity (see Janke et al. 2021). As Kathryn Coff and Jo Lampert (2019) assert, intercultural learning can be fragile, and navigating new spaces for knowledge exchange can be challenging. This book is multi-modal, including texts and images, academic articles and artist conversations. We also adopt a reflexivity in our politics of citation (Liboiron 2021 is a great model) — drawing support for our arguments not just from academic writing, but also interviews, conversations, shared experiences, exhibitions, podcasts and web resources. We want this book to be dynamic and accessible, and also to illustrate the diversity of the work happening in this space; we include links to connect online multimedia content to the written text.

The work we survey originates in southeast Australia, yet is globally interconnected. Contributions here include examples of longstanding relations between Australia's southeast and Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land; in Chapter 7, Kate Senior, Richard Chenhall and Daphne Daniels take up the story of the *Ngukurr News* (now known as the *Yugul Ngukurr Nyus*) and the discovery of feather flowers from Ngukurr at the Melbourne Museum. These are objects that have also been made by Aboriginal women in the southeast and have ongoing significance for the people in that region (best demonstrated by the extensive collection held by the Koorie Heritage Trust). We also include a rich account of the connection between southeast Australia and Berlin, Germany; in Chapter 2, German curator Anna Weinreich travels and writes together with Vicki Couzens and significant Gunditjmara Aboriginal women Elders. They engage an

extensive archival record and collection of artefacts held in Berlin to tell the story of relations between nineteenth-century artist, colonial explorer, and collector Eugene von Guérard, and Aboriginal people and lands in Victoria's Western District. Together, Chapter 2 and Chapter 7 unsettle old (yet enduring) dichotomies between people located in urban, regional, and remote places, and local and global contexts. These stories are embedded in, animated by and inextricable from their places. Yet the places, and their people, are always in relation with other people, places, contexts, and others' understandings of place, kinship, and connection.

The Indigenous paradigm of relationality can be extended to museum artefacts — as things from and interconnected with Country — so even when they are removed from Country, they remain part of Country.<sup>67</sup> This is not a rupture from ongoing efforts of repatriation, return or acknowledgement of 'source communities'; indeed Chapter 8, this volume, articulates the need to forge new pathways for knowledge holders and custodians to get their collections back.<sup>68</sup> It is, however, an important reframing. Relationality draws attention to the interconnection of everything, including objects removed from their custodians and lands of origin. In other words, objects in collections remain connected to people and place because those connections are inalienable.

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<sup>67</sup> See Edmonds et al. 2022b; also Moulton 2018.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Brown and Peers 2005; Lonetree 2012; Bell et al. 2013; Krmpotich et al. 2013; Barwick et al. 2019. There is a rich literature on repatriation and return, alongside an endeavour to support people in 'communities of origin' to be engaged, at every level, in the care for their heritage (as previously held in and controlled by museums). Terri Janke and Company (2018) includes an important roadmap; see also the recent remapping report (M&G QLD 2023).

## *The Living Archive*

Relationality is also a metaphor for the interconnectedness of data held in our nascent Living Archive project,<sup>69</sup> in which we're building two separate yet interconnected digital archives, one focusing on Maree Clarke and her longstanding art and archival practices, and one emphasising the digital repatriation of photographs, artworks and objects relating to Ngukurr's cultural and linguistic heritage. Maree's knowledge, similarly to people in Ngukurr, draws on millennia of traditions, cultural practices, and aesthetic expressions; and, as a senior knowledge holder, she asserts that anyone who wants to learn should have an opportunity to do so. Maree explains the Living Archive in relation to her work:

The Living Archive of Aboriginal Art is ... a platform that will act as an archive for all the making and creating and documenting that I've done, including research. There haven't been a lot of images available to community that show process, unless you go into museum collections. This living archive will be for future generations to access and continue making new memories and inspiring the passing on of cultural knowledge and creative art practice.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> This is an Australian Research Council Indigenous Discovery Project (200100042), entitled "Indigenous Storytelling and the Living Archive of Aboriginal Knowledge," led by Wiradjuri scholar and creative writer Jeanine Leane. The project is also referred to as the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art, which combines the pilot project that began in Maree Clarke's backyard in 2018 (see Thorner et al 2019), and the title of the ARC project.

<sup>70</sup> Clarke et al. 2021.

Part of this work is about building a relational database, yet more important is radically rethinking what archives are and what they do. No longer sites of knowledge ‘retrieval’, we argue that archives must be dynamic sites of knowledge production. Maree herself is a Living Archive (as are all senior Indigenous knowledge holders), and her backyard is a Living Archive (Thorner et al. 2018).

In early 2019, Maree hosted a series of art-making workshops in her backyard with students from the University of Melbourne. The students had volunteered to work alongside her family (mainly nieces and nephews) to learn about and create artwork (a possum skin cloak, river reed necklaces, and a kangaroo teeth necklace) for a solo exhibition curated by Maree called *Re-imagining Culture: Contemporary Connections to Culture* held at the Mildura Arts Centre (March 9 – May 12, 2019). Simultaneously, the students were involved in digitising Maree’s extensive collection of black and white photographs taken by her in the early 1990s (see Edmonds et al 2020)<sup>71</sup> (Figure 15). For the students, this process of working alongside Maree’s family, while digitising many images of the southeast Australian Aboriginal community, including Maree’s immediate family, revealed the circularity and intersections that contribute to what a Living Archive may be. The telling of stories and the making of things isn’t restricted to one instance or point in time; people pictured in the photographs, almost 30 years later, were continuing to pass on knowledge in the backyard and to engage others in the process.

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<sup>71</sup> For more on Maree’s training as a photographer, see Ennis (2021: 133-134).



**Figure 15.** Maree Clarke, black and white photograph collection. Top: Peter Clarke (Maree's brother), with his then four-month-old son, Indi, taken at the NAIDOC March in Melbourne in 1992. Bottom: Alice Clarke (Maree's mother) on left and sister Lee Alice Clarke at right of truck, with Maree's nieces

and nephews (left to right) Kayla, Desiree, Sid, Alicia, Aaron, Kylie and Kristy, taken at Warakoo station near Mildura in 1991.

The Living Archive is therefore dynamic, it can be a person, a place, an object (like a possum skin cloak, as it has recently been at Mount Holyoke College) or all of these things at once (cf. Edmonds et al. 2022c). What is crucial is that ‘the archive’ facilitates the preservation, activation, and further transmission of Indigenous knowledges.<sup>72</sup>

Earlier in this introduction, we argue for the importance of ‘storying’ as living, active and ongoing (Phillips and Bunda 2018). ‘Storying’ is the work of the Living Archive. Stories emerge from Country and make Country knowable. The Living Archive critiques the Western archive, explores alternatives, and, in the process, expands what ‘archive’ means. As Indigenous archivist Kirsten Thorpe (2019:47) explains, the Living Archive is:

[b]oth tangible and intangible records that may be transmitted orally by members of the community or passed on through art, dance or storytelling — that is, they are not captured in particular physical or digital form but are transmitted through interaction and connections between people.

Indigenous-led models that aim to keep knowledge safe and strong, and embrace the possibility of a Living Archive, include the following examples.

The Emu Sky exhibition (15 February – 21 August 2022) at the University of Melbourne, curated by Zena Cumpston (Barkandji), paralleled her work on the Living Pavilion, an Indigenous-led arts and science event discussed in Chapter 5, this volume. Emu Sky made visible

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<sup>72</sup> Christie et al. 2014; Christen and Anderson 2019; McKemmish et al. 2019.

stories of and relationships to Country through plant use and land management. Although the physical exhibition has ended, the exhibition website, created in lieu of a printed catalogue, has the capacity to be updated as knowledge is shared by First Nations artists, writers and scientists.<sup>73</sup> This practice of making knowledge available – across media, time and space – is an important aspect of what a Living Archive could be: interconnected, relational, lived. Emu Sky also illustrates how curating and exhibition are intertwined, with the potential to invite a rethinking of archives. Different knowledges are preserved and embedded in one place, which is visible and accessible on the worldwide web. Reorienting the ephemerality of an exhibition via a website enables ongoing contributions to be held together, keeping the exhibition alive beyond its closing date.

Rethinking archives from Indigenous knowledge perspectives urges an understanding that the revitalisation of stories, the caring for and access to these stories (including material culture), is self-determination and sovereignty work. As we previously discussed, stories are made from and ‘written in the land’, the earth, sea and sky, and that this is the archive (Neale and Kelly 2020:45). To support the safety and longevity of stories as archives, Margo Neale advocates ‘combining the advantages of the Western archives, such as material preservation, with Indigenous people’s own knowledge systems, while transcending the objectifying systems that underpin modern Western archives’ (Neale and Kelly 2020: 60).

Neale’s approach intersects with Yolngu (Arnhem Land, Northern Territory) concepts of *Ganma*, a metaphor for the meeting and mixing of saltwater and freshwater that strives for balance between Western and Indigenous ideas, and *Garma*, the place on which different groups

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<sup>73</sup> For more, see <https://emusky.culturalcommons.edu.au/exhibition/>

of people meet to enact truth telling and resolve issues. These ideas strive for balance between competing concepts. *Ganma* and *Garma* are examples of Indigenous knowledge on Country that also welcomes and acknowledges other ways of knowing (Verran et al. 2022).

Julie Gough and her co-authors (Chapter 8, this volume) similarly argue for a combination of Western conservation practices and First Nations knowledge, prioritising Indigenous concerns for the culturally safe storage of material culture. They propose an Indigenous model of cultural spaces located around the country that would support this work, including training a younger Indigenous generation in collections management and curatorship (see also Gough 2023). Such an approach shifts our understandings away from a reliance on dominant Western archival strategies, to focus on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

Our final example of a living archive comes from Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist and curator Jonathan Jones, whose research traces the continuity of linework motifs through four generations of southeast Australian Aboriginal men's art practices. Jones speaks of this as a living archive system (see Jones 2018) in ways that are both synchronous and resonant with Maya Hodge (quoted at the beginning of this introduction), in that all creative expression is embedded in Indigenous sovereignty, honouring of Elders' teaching, and extending 60,000 years of caring for Country into the future.

Each of these understandings of a Living Archive — from the experiences in Maree's backyard, to curating, exhibiting, archiving, and art-making — contests Western archiving paradigms while centring Indigenous knowledge as creative and dynamic, forging possibilities for intercultural exchange. Aboriginal creatives and researchers such as Clarke, Cumpston, Neale, Gough, Thorpe, Jones and Hodge all recognise that the past is not over. This is an argument that aligns with Gilchrist's 'eternal present', which connects and reconnects with the

past, ensuring ‘the wellbeing of the Ancestors, the features of the landscape that they created and then became, and the people who are forever connected to each’ (2016:19). The intercultural collaboration at the heart of this book in fact reveals that Indigenous knowledges are ever-present.

### ***Three intersecting crises***

We write together in times characterised by three intersecting crises: the global pandemic, systemic racism, and climate change. The intersectionality of these crises throws into stark relief and intensifies the vulnerability of Indigenous knowledges. To change the structures and systems of discrimination requires self-determination: the consistent, ongoing involvement of Indigenous people to direct and enact the changes necessary to promote equality and wellbeing (see Rademaker and Rowse 2020).

As Indigenous scholars argue,<sup>74</sup> limited understandings (and denial) of Indigenous histories, life experiences, and knowledge of land and how to sustain it have allowed catastrophic environmental degradation and destruction. Aboriginal people in Australia’s southeast have been removed from Country, breaking down their ability to care for it. These are consequences of colonialism. This volume centres Indigenous knowledge systems and emphasises relationality as a crucial component of sustainability, both environmental and cultural.

These same crises are also urging Western collecting institutions (museums, universities, art galleries, archives, libraries) to urgently re-evaluate their missions. What are museums for, what ethical obligations do they have, and to whom? Museums have shifted to

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<sup>74</sup> Pascoe 2018; Cumpston 2020; Smith et al. 2019.

address inequalities, yet work remains to continue to improve relationships to support Indigenous knowledges.<sup>75</sup> Intercultural collaboration, directed by Indigenous relationality, offers a powerful corrective to ongoing threats to Indigenous ontologies and, indeed, to global survival.

Aboriginal environmentalist, farmer and writer Bruce Pascoe (Yuin/Bunurong/palawa) reminds us that Aboriginal people have been inviting non-Indigenous invaders to learn from, with, and about Indigenous people and their knowledge since at least the late 18th century.

Pascoe explains that when relationships are formed, they can become:

a transformative experience, not because [non-Indigenous] people suddenly see the light; become wise members of the human race — but because they know Aboriginal people, and those relationships and those cups of tea and those remembrances of birthdays and things like that are the stuff of human life and that becomes quite a profound change in people’s attitude even though it doesn’t sound like rocket science. It’s that relationship which is important. The reason for the failure of Australian attempts to so-called ‘close the gap,’ are because there’s been no friendship, there’s been no relationship with Aboriginal Australians.<sup>76</sup>

Younger generations are learning from older Aboriginal activists and advocating intensely, through their art practices, for climate justice and the recognition and redress of systemic racism. Aboriginal people continue to be disproportionately affected by child removal, deaths in custody,

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<sup>75</sup> Terri Janke and Company 2018; Kreps 2020; Thorner 2022; Chapter 8, this volume.

<sup>76</sup> Pascoe in Kinnane 2016:186.

and health, education and employment sectors that do not account for their ways of knowing, being and doing.<sup>77</sup> And yet young activists — like Mitch Mahoney (see Chapter 6, this volume) and the collective known as Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR) — are continuing to raise awareness of an ever-present Aboriginality in Naarm/Melbourne, emphasising connections to Ancestral sites in places that, on the surface, might seem to have been obliterated by the built environment.<sup>78</sup> They remind us that Naarm is Country.

Transformative experiences — such as those Pascoe calls for — are not without effort. In this volume, Zena Cumpston and Rimi Khan (Chapter 5) and Mitch Mahoney and Amélie Ward (Chapter 6) offer examples of and experiments with native plants (as integrated within a knowledge system necessary for survival and wellbeing) and the challenges of bringing these knowledges to bear on Western institutions. Tiriki Onus, Sally Treloyn, Megan McPherson and Reuben Brown (Chapter 3) and Brian Martin and Charlotte Day (Chapter 4) also demonstrate the labour of bringing Indigenous knowledges into the academy, and the forms it might take. Relationships that live with difference alert us to the possibilities of countering the ongoing crises of our time.

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<sup>77</sup> The recent Closing the Gap report has revealed that for the last ten-plus years, the ‘gap’ has not closed at all; the data reveals that only four of seventeen targets are on track (Morse 2022). Further, systemic disadvantage is still a problem (see Collard 2022).

<sup>78</sup> For more on WAR, see their presence on Facebook ([https://www.facebook.com/WARcollective?ref=py\\_c](https://www.facebook.com/WARcollective?ref=py_c)) and Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/warrevolt/?hl=en>).

## **Conclusion: art is wellbeing**

Returning to Vicki Couzens' idea of creative cultural expression, art-making is inseparable from caring for Country and culture. Bangerang Elder Uncle (John) Sandy Atkinson (1932–2016) stated in 2004 that, for southeast Australian First Nations people, 'art is us' (Edmonds 2007). Art is not a separate category of action or activism, and artists are not a separate category of people.

Creative cultural expression is a way of taking up space, of truth-telling and healing (Dudgeon et al. 2022). As Peter Waples-Crowe and Megan Evans articulate in Chapter 1, 'making art sustains our wellbeing'. Their art-making is part of who they are, of remaining connected and building relationships, and opening up space to discuss the past. This is not easy. Art-making and the relationships that emerge from working together often expose difficult and traumatic experiences. At the same time, these challenging collaborations can be meaningful in the long-term, offering ways of keeping, renewing, and revealing stories that can shift the denial of Australia's violent history. Unsettling denial can reconnect people with place and identity.

As psychologist Pat Dudgeon (Bardi) and her collaborator Abigail Bray (2019) argue, the interconnection between kinship and Country requires thinking through the complexities of Aboriginal people's connections to Country as kin, which means recognising one's obligations to Country for social and emotional wellbeing. They stress the importance of 'women's strengths-based custodial kinship with the land as the source of wellbeing and environmental reproductive justice' (Dudgeon and Bray 2019:2) and cite Bunuba Elder June Oscar:

[C]ountry is where my people need to be able to draw positive emotions, meaning and purpose, self-esteem and resilience. The land provides what we call in the Bunuba language Ngarranggani. Ngarranggani lies at the heart of

our culture ... We are of the land, and to care for and protect the land is to nurture and safeguard our families and our future. This intimately entwined relationship of land, language and culture is common to Indigenous peoples across the world. Language is a vehicle to transmit the cultural strengths I've referred to, and to heal our communities and reconcile our nation.<sup>79</sup>

These authors' research makes the case plainly: if you look after Country, Country will look after you. Humans cannot be healthy unless Country is healthy, and the reverse is also true.

Keeping Country healthy also extends to how materials from specific places are cared for, used to tell stories and, in turn, maintain cultural knowledge. Julie Gough and her co-authors (Chapter 8) discuss different modalities for looking after Country. The artists collect and forage material, using Country for and in their artworks, while also navigating their own approaches in and through collections that have 'kept' their knowledge and Ancestral items locked up for generations. Both these kinds of art practices assert identity and support wellbeing. For Aboriginal people, art is connected to Country and kin; and art-making can restore confidence among people in relation to their culture and heritage (Edmonds et al. 2012). Many examples of this are playing out in the organisations we discuss above, when members of community step into the Koorie Heritage Trust to visit with old family photos, or attend an exhibition launch at Blak Dot Gallery to reconnect with friends they have not seen in a while. Most recently, Maree Clarke's solo retrospective, *Ancestral Memories*, at the NGV (2021–22), was a chance for younger generations to see what is possible and what they could become.

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<sup>79</sup> Oscar 2017; cf. Dudgeon and Bray 2019:7.

There is a recurrent theme among Indigenous knowledge holders of the southeast: art endures, in spite of the removal of children and pushing people off their lands. Art is stronger than these efforts to control bodies and own property to justify the colonial project. ‘Art is in the blood’<sup>80</sup>. Art ‘is in your cellular memory’;<sup>81</sup> it is beyond conscious awareness. As we have already alluded to, this has been articulated as Ancestral memory/ies. Artist Karen Casey (1956–2021, palawa) explained in 2004:

I feel we maintain an attachment with the past despite having no conscious awareness of it. Regardless of whether or not there was any prior knowledge of Aboriginality, I think it’s carried on through generations encoded in our DNA as a sort of Ancestral memory ... [T]here’s also a certain level of connection to one’s Ancestral lineage which comes out of intuition and connecting with the land.<sup>82</sup>

This — the relationality and the sovereignty of Aboriginal people in Australia’s southeast — is the strongest through-line of this book. Artists maintain unbreakable connections to Ancestors, to Country and to culture, in spite of massive and ongoing efforts to disrupt and even eradicate them. This book is an intercultural and collaborative project, and the work — as evidenced in the vibrant stories that follow — is diverse and ongoing.

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<sup>80</sup> Lyn Briggs (Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta), 2005; cf. Edmonds 2007:285.

<sup>81</sup> Robyne Latham (Yamatji), 2004; cf. Edmonds 2007:288.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Edmonds 2007:289–90.

All the contributions here resonate with and to some extent are influenced by the work of Maree Clarke (Figure 16). Collectively, we argue that Aboriginal creatives, and especially Blak matriarchs, who have launched their work into greater public awareness and onto cosmopolitan and global stages, have fundamentally shifted the way we think about how knowledge originates, endures and changes (see Figure 17). The contributions in this volume are also evidence of the necessity of intercultural collaboration insisting that Indigenous knowledges be equal. This involves truth-telling, and requires us all to take responsibility for understanding Indigenous peoples' continuing connections to culture and Country; to engage with the ideas of unceded sovereignty, relationality and intercultural collaboration; and to commit to doing things differently — for now and for everywhen.



**Figure 16.** Maree Clarke in her backyard wrapped in the possum skin cloak made for her by friends and family in 2018. (Photo: megan evans)



**Figure 17.** Maree Clarke working in her backyard in 2021 sorting feathers for artwork, with her cloak in background. (Photo: Julian Kingma)

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