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## **THE LIVING ARCHIVE OF ABORIGINAL ART: EXPRESSIONS OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ART-MAKING**

The story used to be painted onto people and performed as an archive [...] it's passed down through the generations that way. [W]e're just doing it in the 21st century in a different way[...]. I guess when people think about archives - the word 'living' was never associated with [them], you just think about

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books and manuscripts and documents being held in museum collections or libraries, where archives generally live. You don't really think about a whole range of people having access. And a 'living archive' to me is all of that stuff we do in my backyard [art studio]... Just creating, making, and sharing that information.<sup>5</sup>

-Maree Clarke, Mutti Mutti/Wemba Wemba/Boonwurrung artist<sup>6</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Eels are funny creatures: territorial in nature, they follow a sophisticated annual migration pattern. After spawning in the Coral Sea, small larvae float on the ocean currents, reaching the east coast of Australia, a distance of some 4,000km. Here, they lie dormant until they metamorphose into 'glass elvers' (young eels), honing in on the inland estuaries that had previously harboured their parents. This pattern of migration has been observed by Aboriginal peoples from the southeast region of Australia for thousands of years, providing a rich food source, which was cultivated through the construction of multiple eel weirs,<sup>7</sup> and elaborately designed cone-shaped eel traps / baskets. Today, eel traps continue to be woven from local grasses, funnelling eels through to a

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<sup>5</sup> Clarke, M. (2019, 2 June). *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art* [Group Discussion]. Aboriginal Artists Small Group Discussion. Melbourne, Vic. Australia.

<sup>6</sup> These denote Maree Clarke's language/cultural groups in southeast Australia. All Aboriginal people in this article have these inserted in brackets after their name. NB: Maree's co-authoring contributions as an Aboriginal woman and a senior knowledge holder were central to providing guidance, critical feedback and authorization for this article's publication. To avoid switching between tense for reader-clarity we refer to Maree in the third person throughout this article.

<sup>7</sup> The endurance of this knowledge across millennia, as well as its contemporary significance, were recognized in the declaration of Budj Bim (in Western Victoria) as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2019.

tapered end, where they are unable to escape. Each trap is distinctive, its design denoting the maker and the location it comes from, and like the eels, the traps hold memories of ‘doing things’ from long ago—knowledge systems handed down across the generations—a ‘living archive’.<sup>8</sup>

One of Maree Clarke’s cultural Elders, Connie Hart (Gunditjmara, 1917-1993), initiated the revitalization of this knowledge and these embodied practices. Living near Lake Condah Aboriginal mission, Aunty Connie grew up in a time when Aboriginal families were afraid of children being forcibly removed from their homes (as part of assimilation policies formally in effect until the 1970s), especially if they were known to be passing on traditional knowledge. As a child, she watched her female kin in secret, strictly forbidden to weave by her mother and aunties. When she was in her 60s, Connie realised she was one of very few people who still knew the grasses and the stitches necessary to make baskets (and other weavings). She began a practice secretly teaching some of the women around her—which slowly gave rise to a new generation of weavers who are now proud of their work as expressions of cultural survival.<sup>9</sup>

We begin with eels and eel traps in south-eastern Australia, as they resonate with the endurance and resilience of Indigenous knowledge systems across millennia. When artist and curator Maree Clarke was commissioned in 2018 by the University of Melbourne to create two eel traps as contemporary art installations, her intention for the artworks

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<sup>8</sup> Wettenhall, G. with the Gunditjmara People. (2010). *The People of Budj Bim: Engineers of Aquaculture, Builders of Stone House Settlements and Warriors Defending Country*. Mollonghip, Australia: em PRESS Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> For more, see: <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/koorie-art-and-artefacts/aunty-connie-hart-teaching-basket-weaving/>.

was to make tangible to a broad audience Indigenous peoples' "ontological relationship to land". This is, as Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains: "[t]he ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous".<sup>10</sup> In this article, drawing from Clarke, Moreton-Robinson, and other Indigenous matriarchs' work, we argue that art-making is archive-making, and that these interrelated processes exemplify how sovereignty is not and could never be ceded.

Clarke's two eel traps were made of different materials and embedded in very different places, yet both offered spectacular and supersized renditions of an ancient and ongoing practice. One was a three-metre-long glass sculpture designed for the University of Melbourne's newly renovated 'Old Quad' building. The other was a ten-metre-long assemblage of organic materials—river reeds, native grasses, and stringy bark- woven together and launched at the Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC), in Melbourne's inner-west. The differences between these eel traps reflect the divergent ways in which Indigenous knowledge is produced and circulated in different institutional settings.

Anthropologist Alfred Gell took up the philosophical and ethnographic dilemma of defining "an artwork" —almost 25 years ago—using eel traps as a central example.<sup>11</sup> Gell called for an anthropology of art that "would enfranchise 'artefacts' and allow for their circulation as artworks, displaying them as embodiments or residues of complex intention-

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<sup>10</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Gell, A. (1996). Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps. *Journal of Material Culture*, 1 (1), 15-38, 33-34.

alities”.<sup>12</sup> He mobilized Nicholas Thomas’ (1991) idea that objects “have no essences, only an indefinite range of potentials”.<sup>13</sup> Highlighting “Vogel’s Net”—the centrepiece of the Art/Artifact exhibition at the Center for African Art in New York in 1988—Gell reminds us that a hunting tool is never just utilitarian, but is also likely to have been embedded in ritual, certainly objectifies the knowledge and skill of the hunter, and indexes the scenario in which the tool-creator/hunter and animal/victim come into contact.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Gell’s examples, Maree Clarke’s 2019 eel traps were commissioned *as* artworks. Their reason for coming-into-being was to aestheticize a traditional form; to demonstrate both the endurance of Indigenous knowledge in southeastern Australia, and the necessity of creative reinvention and adaptation to ensure this continuity. These eel traps are also inextricable from Indigenous understandings of Country and kin;<sup>15</sup> through their making, Maree Clarke transmits knowledge to future generations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Their exhibition also publicly declares: despite over 200 years of colonisation, *we are still here*. The commissioning of these artworks was a bold move for an institution still coming to terms with its racist and colonial foundations.<sup>16</sup> Clarke and her collaborators—in taking up the

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<sup>12</sup> Gell, *Vogel’s Net*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Gell, *Vogel’s Net*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Gell, *Vogel’s Net*, 24-27; and for more on eel-traps and their ritual significance (in Papua New Guinea), see Lemonnier, P. (2012). *Entwined by Nature: Eels, Traps, and Ritual*. In Lemonnier, P. *Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication* (45-62). London: Routledge.

<sup>15</sup> Country, with a capital ‘C’, denotes the traditional lands and language groups of the many First Nations peoples who make up the continent of Australia.

<sup>16</sup> See Faulkhead, S. and Berg, J. (2010) *Power and the Passion: Our Ancestors Return Home*. Melbourne: Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. with respect to the Aboriginal community in Victoria taking legal action against the University of Melbourne and the Museum of Victoria, challenging their right to keep collections of Aboriginal Ancestral remains, while highlighting the enduring colonial regimes of the Western Institution.

commission—confront difficult histories and demonstrate the monumental task of decolonising artworlds and their regimes of value.<sup>17</sup>

This article emerges from the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art (LAAA), a project based at the University of Melbourne, and guided by artist Maree Clarke and archivist Kirsten Thorpe (Worimi).<sup>18</sup> Below, we introduce ourselves as authors and participants in the art-making processes we analyse. We situate the LAAA project within wider efforts to decolonise Western institutions, and define the *living archive* as an expression of Blak matriarchy. We then turn our attention to Maree’s backyard art-making workshops as a practice of cultural sovereignty. Maree’s backyard/art studio is a site of intercultural knowledge-exchange and community-making, made possible through an ethos of generosity and reciprocity at the heart of Maree’s practice. We argue that Maree’s practices of generosity help to foster communal bonds that instil a sense of collective responsibility for Aboriginal cultural knowledge. In the final section, we return to Maree’s two eel trap artworks, and how these offer different possibilities for decolonising Western knowledge institutions (the university, the art gallery).

## 2. Situating Maree; Situating the Research

Maree Clarke lives in Narm (Melbourne), the cosmopolitan capital of the southeast Australian state of Victoria. She has been a practising artist for over 30 years, emphasizing the reclamation of her Ancestral cultural

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<sup>17</sup> Myers, F. (2001). Introduction: Regimes of Value. In Meyers, F. (Ed.). *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (3-64). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

<sup>18</sup> For further information on the LAAA project go to: <https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/the-living-archive-of-aboriginal-art>.

material through contemporary art-making. The southeast was the region first colonised, where Aboriginal people were rapidly and violently dispossessed, and their culture denied.<sup>19</sup> From colonisation onward, Aboriginal people have been surveilled, and their cultural heritage has been collected and catalogued according to Western taxonomies, cultural hierarchies and racial logics. Maree's words in the epigraph above articulate an alternative view of 'the archive', further revealed through the making of her eel traps, as an expression of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing things.<sup>20</sup>

As non-Indigenous academics and co-authors of this article we—Fran Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, and Rimi Khan—are led by Maree and acknowledge our positions as 'occupiers'<sup>21</sup> of colonised countries. For Australian Indigenous people, introducing oneself is an important cultural protocol that allows others to know who you are and where you come from. It is increasingly relevant for non-Indigenous scholars, when writing with Indigenous collaborators, to acknowledge their cultural positions so that (especially Indigenous) readers can situate the authors

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<sup>19</sup> The destruction of Aboriginal people's way of life as a result of colonisation, particularly in the state of Victoria, has been well documented. The Stolen Generations children removed from their families with the intention of assimilating them into the 'white' community endure ongoing grief and intergenerational trauma. For more, see Broome, R. (2005). *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800*. Crow's Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). (1997). *Bringing Them Home. National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social\\_justice/bringing\\_them\\_home\\_report.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Martin, K., and Mirraboopa, B. (2003). Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous Research and Indigenist Research. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27 (76), 203-214.

<sup>21</sup> We use the word 'occupier' (meaning to 'take or hold possession') in contrast to the more benign term 'settler', which implies a calm and relatively opposition-less response to invasion by non-Indigenous people to Indigenous lands. Neither Australia nor the USA was peacefully settled—each has a history of non-Indigenous occupation, frontier violence and aggressive, persistent attempts to eliminate First-Nations peoples from their lands.

and their arguments.<sup>22</sup> Fran Edmonds and Sabra Thorner are of European/British descent and have worked and co-researched with Maree for almost 20 years.<sup>23</sup> Rimi Khan is a second-generation migrant to Australia of Bangladeshi descent, and her cultural background informs a decade of research into migrant and refugee art and community-making.

As non-Indigenous occupier-colonisers and migrants, we benefit from privileges of education, health and employment that are structured according to a Western system of entitlement. Aileen Moreton-Robinson declares that neither early British occupiers and their descendants, nor more recent migrants, have the ontological connection with the land that Indigenous people do, and both are implicated in structures of colonialism.<sup>24</sup> As academic and Aboriginal rights activist Clare Land (2015) insists, non-Indigenous people must recognise how they benefit from these structures as a first step in expressing solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

### 3. Defining the Living Archive

Over the last 25 years, endeavours to 'Indigenize the archive' both in and beyond Australia<sup>25</sup> are turning the focus away from text-based

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<sup>22</sup> For instance see Brown, L, Kelada, O. and Jones, D. (2020). 'While I Knew I Was Raced, I Didn't Think Much of It': The Need for Racial Literacy in Decolonising Classrooms. *Postcolonial Studies*, 1-22. DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2020.1759755.

<sup>23</sup> Thorner is an American citizen, who lives and works in the USA.

<sup>24</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, J. and Christen, K. (2013). 'Chuck a Copyright on It': Dilemmas of Digital Return and the Possibilities for Traditional Knowledge Licenses and Labels. *Museum Anthropology Review*, 7 (1-2), 105-126; Boast, R. and Enote, J. (2013). Virtual Repatriation: It Is Neither Virtual nor Repatriation. *Heritage in the Context of Globalization* (103-113). New York: Springer; Christie, M. (2005). *Aboriginal*

repositories of information, towards active, multimedia sites of creative knowledge production. Recently, Aboriginal scholars, writers, and artists have revealed how the 'archive' has historically functioned as a system for controlling, assimilating, and dispossessing Aboriginal people of their culture. These systems involve collecting, classifying and preserving culture according to European and colonial taxonomies. Libraries and museums have long represented cultural objects in ways that detach them from the stories, relationships and knowledge systems that produced them.<sup>26</sup> In Australia, recent projects such as *Ara Irititja*, *Murkurtu*, and the *Barku Larrngy Mulka* project have developed alternative archive systems by establishing digital platforms with corresponding cultural protocols. These projects provide ways for people to access their cultural collections, including the capacity for people to correct the (erroneous, incomplete or absent) information recorded in the past in relation to their objects/treasures. These archives also turn the focus away from traditional collecting institutions back to community-focused, culturally-responsive modes of transmitting knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

The LAAA project was initiated by Maree Clarke, who wanted to represent her work by showcasing the connections between her art-

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Knowledge Traditions in Digital Environments. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 34, 61-66.

<sup>26</sup> Thorpe, K. (2019a). *Transformative Praxis -Building Spaces for Indigenous Self-Determination in Libraries and Archives*. In the Library with the Lead Pipe. An Open Access, Open Peer-Reviewed Journal. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/transformative-praxis/>.

<sup>27</sup> Thorner, S., and Dallwitz, J. (2015). *Storytelling Photographs, Animating Anangu: How Ara Irititja—An Indigenous Digital Archive in Central Australia—Facilitates Cultural Reproduction*. Decker, J. (Ed.). *Technology and Digital Initiatives: Innovative Approaches for Museums* (53-60). London: Rowman and Littlefield; Christen, K. (2015). *A Safe Keeping Place: Mukurtu CMS Innovating Museum Collaborations*. In Decker, J. (Ed.). *Technology and Digital Initiatives: Innovative Approaches for Museums* (61-68). London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

making and the stories that surround this process. Over many years, Clarke discussed with the co-authors of this paper her interest in a digital tool that could make visible the links between her art-making and its cultural contexts. She is driven by an urgency -to activate the past in the present, always with the future in mind, AND to make the endurance and contemporaneity of Indigenous knowledge tangible, visible to wider publics. Kirsten Thorpe defines such a 'living archive' as:

both 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.<sup>28</sup>

A 'living archive' exemplifies a holistic interconnectedness between archival objects and the institutions that hold them, contemporary artworks and the people who make them, and the stories that weave them all together.

In this article, we define the living archive as a Blak matriarchal intervention into the structure of the colonial archive.<sup>29</sup> Artist, curator

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<sup>28</sup> Thorpe, K. (2019b). Speaking Back to Colonial Collections: Building Living Aboriginal Archives. *Artlink - Indigenous: Storytelling in a Digital World*, 39 (2). <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4762/speaking-back-to-colonial-collections-building-liv/>, 47.

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed discussion of Indigenous matriarchal-led response to reclaiming and revivifying Ancestral material through speaking back to records in the colonial archive via creative practices, see Balla, P. (2016). Sovereignty: Inalienable and Intimate. In Balla, P. and Delany, M. (Eds). *Sovereignty* (11-16). Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art; and Thorner, S., Edmonds, F., Clarke, M., and Balla, P. (2018). Maree's Backyard: Intercultural Collaborations for Indigenous Sovereignty in Melbourne. *Oceania*, 88 (3), 269-291.

and scholar Paola Balla (Gunditjmara/Wemba Wemba) explains the concept of Blak Matriarchy:

My genealogy, my family stories, the fact that I'm a Wemba Wemba woman is everything to me, is central to who I am. As matriarchal people [...] we follow all the stories and the lines of our women -my mother, my grandmother, great grandmother, etc... This is thousands of generations.

Our stories and our sense of self, how to live as an Aboriginal woman, come from that. It teaches you about how to be in the world. It teaches you about protocol, respect, how to treat other people, to be kind and generous, to share, practice reciprocity, to be dignified, to adorn yourself beautifully, to have pride when you go out, to represent your family and culture to the outside world and to our cultural gatherings.

[...P]art of that matriarchy for me is celebrating our beauty. We are depicted as ugly and undesirable by white Australia, we're never written about as beautiful. [...W]e've always [...] been proud of who we are. That's what it is for me. It is old, it precedes feminism.<sup>30</sup>

For Maree, it is vital that the stories and cultural knowledge surrounding her art remain accessible to the Aboriginal community. As a Blak matriarch, intergenerational and intercultural sharing are integral to her practice, and contribute to solidarity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. From Maree's backyard and beyond, non-Indigenous participants can learn, listen and acknowledge difference in embodied

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<sup>30</sup> Perković, J. and Balla, P. (2018). *Paola Balla: Blak Matriarchy*. Assemble Papers. <https://assemblepapers.com.au/2018/04/26/paola-balla-blak-matriarchy/>.

and experiential ways, ultimately supporting Indigenous sovereignty in an endeavour to address the ongoing trauma of colonisation.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Backyard Art-Making as a Practice of Sovereignty

The dispossession of Aboriginal people from their homelands, the removal of children from their families, and other governmental efforts to extinguish Aboriginal culture have meant that much knowledge has, for generations, not been practiced or shared within Aboriginal communities. Since the late 1990s, as part of a group of Aboriginal women artists,<sup>32</sup> Maree has revived the skills and knowledge associated with making kangaroo-teeth necklaces, possum-skin cloaks, river reed body-adornments, ritualized mourning practices, and eel traps.<sup>33</sup> These revitalization efforts have required rigorous research of historical collections (including extant artifacts, archival photographs, and early colonial texts), trial and error in making, and experiential learning.

For Maree, this has entailed visiting museums around the world and critically engaging their 19<sup>th</sup>-century collections and associated records. With her partner, Len Tregonning (Gunai, now deceased), she experimented with the crafting of many different traditional objects. She

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<sup>31</sup> Thorpe, *Transformative Praxis*.

<sup>32</sup> For more on this dynamic group of women, now matriarchal knowledge-holders, see Reynolds, A., Couzens, D., Couzens, V., Darroch, L., and Hamm, T. (2005). *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay Collection in the National Museum of Australia*. National Museum of Australia Collection Series. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press.

<sup>33</sup> There is now a growing body of literature on the revival of cultural/art practices and the colonial archives/artefacts that have inspired the contemporary versions in southeast Australia; see Thorner, Maree's Backyard; Reynolds *et al*, *Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak*; and Keeler, C. and Couzens, V. (2010). *Meerrenge-An. This Is My Country: The Story of Aboriginal Victoria Told through Art*. Melbourne: Koorie Heritage Trust, BPA Print Group.

describes how her work involved, “going out, collecting, documenting [...] I must have over twenty thousand photos just on that collecting process and putting things together”.<sup>34</sup> Maree translates and recontextualises these ‘traditional’ knowledges by bringing together institutional archives with her own creative interests and the stories and contributions of her community networks.

Maree’s practice demonstrates how culture-making through art-making is a sovereign act. Storytelling is an Indigenous knowledge practice—and, increasingly, a methodological and theoretical intervention seeking to decolonise Western knowledge production in the academy.<sup>35</sup> For Aboriginal artists from Australia’s southeast, sovereignty over their lands was never ceded, and indeed, connections to Country are inalienable; this is exemplified in the common refrain “Always was, always will be Aboriginal land”. North American artist and art historian Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) suggests that “Sovereignty could serve as an overarching concept for interpreting Indigeneity, the interconnected space of the colonial gaze, and deconstruction of the colonizing image or text”. Further, “sovereignty [...] is a means to protect and reimagine our philosophies and way of life. Art or making culture is integral [...] to the affirmation of these ideals”.<sup>36</sup>

Filmmaker and friend of Maree’s, Simon Rose (Birriah/Gurreng Gurreng) has been filming Maree’s art-making workshops, documenting the relationships they reveal between people, places, and things.<sup>37</sup> Simon

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<sup>34</sup> Clarke, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

<sup>35</sup> For more on this, see Phillips, L.G., and Bunda, T. (2018). *Research Through, With, and As Storying*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>36</sup> Rickard, J. (2017). Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art. *Art Journal*, 76 (2), 81-84, 83-84.

<sup>37</sup> See Rose, S. (2018). *Cultural Activist* [Film. 13 mins. Producer: Richard Jameson].

recognises how Maree's art-making sustains connections to Country, and is an assertion of sovereignty:<sup>38</sup>

[T]he work that Maree does, it's not just a revival of the cultural practise, it's a reinvigorating of the actual land itself. [...A]s Aboriginal people, we never ceded our sovereignty to our land. [...]t's not just that Maree has brought back this practise and people have started to do it, and learnt from it. [...] It's about the actual success and fruition of the Indigenous community in Victoria. [...] Maree's work is absolutely tied in [w]ith our rights and reclamation of our ownership of land.<sup>39</sup>

Maree has lived in Melbourne for over thirty years, yet her family connections to Country are in the northwest region of Victoria, in and around the town of Mildura, on the Dhungala (Murray River). Just as her art-making tells stories of her connections to Country, her art is frequently dependent on collecting the necessary materials from Country. This includes repurposing kangaroo carcasses from road-kill to extract teeth from the skull for kangaroo-teeth necklaces, gathering feathers from deceased birds for river reed necklaces, and seeds/pods from various plants, which also contribute to various body adornments, as well as locating treasured ochre deposits from ancient sites well-known to Maree and her kin.

During workshops conducted in the height of (southern hemisphere) summer, in February 2019, Maree's great nephew Mitch Mahoney (Bo-

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<sup>38</sup> Balla, P. (2018). Walking in Deadly Blak Women's Footprints. *Artlink: Indigenous Kanarn Wangkiny Wanggandi Karlto - Speaking from Inside*, 38 (2), 22-29.

<sup>39</sup> Rose, S. (2019, 2 June). *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art* [Group Discussion]. Aboriginal Artist's Small Group Discussion. Melbourne, Vic., Australia.



**[Fig. 1].** Exhibition image showing a possum skin cloak (background), 'Family Cloak' (2019) by Maree Clarke and family; and 50 meter 'River Reed Necklace' with cockatoo feathers (2019) by Maree Clarke and collaborators. Re-imagining Culture: Contemporary Connections to Culture, Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, Australia, March 9 – May 12, 2019. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy the artists.

onwurrung) was tasked with leading the making of a number of traditional items. Many hours were spent sitting at the table in the backyard, where he enthusiastically worked with his cousins. All were guided by Maree, alongside her husband Nicholas Hovington (Palawa) and Elders. Together they created a possum-skin cloak, a supersized river reed necklace, studded with an array of cockatoo feathers, and a



[Fig. 2]. 'Family Cloak' (2019) by Maree Clarke and family. *Re-imagining Culture: Contemporary Connections to Culture*, Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, Australia, March 9 – May 12, 2019. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy the artists.

kangaroo tooth necklace for an exhibition to be held at the Mildura Arts Centre, a major regional art gallery.<sup>40</sup>

This is the first kangaroo tooth necklace to be made by Mitch. There is much to learn: ripping sinew from a kangaroo's tail; scraping its teeth clean; collecting and boiling resin from a nearby gum tree for adhering teeth to sinew; binding these to a leather-neck strap; and applying ochre to dye the strap a dark red colour. This happens over several hot and

<sup>40</sup> The exhibition *Re-imagining Culture: Contemporary Connections to Culture* was held 9 March - 12 May, 2019; for more, see Thorner, S., Edmonds, F., Clarke, M., Thorpe, K., Khan, R., and Huebner, S. (2019). The Living Archive of Aboriginal Art: Maree Clarke and the Circulation of Photographs as Culture-Making. In Castañeda, N., Aguilera Skvirsky, K., and Smith T. L. (Eds.). *Mapping Meaning: Archives and Photography* Special Issue, 3, 38-63. <http://www.mappingmeaning.org/the-journal-issues>.



**[Fig. 3].** ‘Thung-ung coorang (Kangaroo teeth necklace)’ by Mitch Mahoney, Indi Clarke, Ebony Clarke and Nicholas Hovington. *Re-imagining Culture: Contemporary Connections to Culture*, Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, Australia, March 9 – May 12, 2019. Photo Fran Edmonds. Courtesy the artists.

hardworking days. The final addition to the necklace is an 18-carat gold 3D-printed kangaroo tooth.

Although the process resulted in a contemporary art piece, it grew out of old cultural knowledge. Mitch had listened to stories and received guidance from Elders, and at times grew up on Country. As he explains:

It changed the experience from just making an exhibition and making art, to **going home** [*emphasis added*]. It turns it into a [...] spiritual experience to be able to go home, and while you’re at home, working and making a living, doing something that you love doing [...] where there’s no other place you’d rather be than

back on the river where you grew up. I think that's [...] the power behind it. As well as stopping on the side of the road to collect kangaroo teeth, just having to travel outside of the city to get natural materials that you can't find inside of it, just really makes the experience something else.<sup>41</sup>

Mitch's comments are an expression of Moreton-Robinson's ontological relationship to land; the "intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans, and land; it is a form of embodiment. As the descendants and reincarnation of these ancestral beings, Indigenous people derive their sense of belonging to country through and from them. [...] Colonization did not destroy this...".<sup>42</sup> Mitch's art practice—travelling to Country, collecting materials on Country, and creating new works from those experiences and materials—these are expressions of sovereignty.

## 5. Generosity as Intercultural Community-Making

Maree's archive-making is a dynamic and communal process. Mitch points out that unlike institutional archives, which involve controlling cultural knowledge on behalf of Aboriginal people, Maree's art-making produces an evolving body of knowledge about traditional practices that comes to life through its circulation in the community:

Archives always seem [to be] things in the past, things that are dead where you can't actually meet the people who are involved

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<sup>41</sup> Mahoney, M. (2019, 2 June). *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art* [Group Discussion]. Aboriginal Artists Small Group Discussion. Melbourne, Vic. Australia.

<sup>42</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 12.



[Fig. 4]. The making of the nieces' and nephews' kangaroo teeth necklace, Maree's Backyard, 2019. Image showing the necklace in early stages of completion, with kangaroo tail sinew soaking in the bowl and drying on the wooden board, along with ochre and resin in pots. The possum skin cloak, under-construction, is draped over a table in the background. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy of the artists.

in the information. [...] For me, [the Living Archive] is about having something that shows contemporary Aboriginal practices, and Aboriginal people doing things that are also traditional. Working together and showing the evolution in our art practices [...] and all those things documented for future generations of Indigenous people.<sup>43</sup>

Maree's practice is informed by a sense of cultural urgency; many people continue to think Aboriginal people do not even exist in this part of Australia. She believes that knowledge about Aboriginal culture needs not only to be preserved, but *shared* to ensure its continued survival.

<sup>43</sup> Mahoney, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

Mitch comments on the significance of the arts-revival currently happening in Australia's southeast, and the responsibility to carry it forward:

[T]he possum skin cloak coming back is just the most remarkable revitalisation of cultural items I've ever seen. We need these kinds of [living] archives to hold information, because it will be up to my generation in 20, 30 years to pass this knowledge down. And if we don't get information from our Elders now, we could be looking at another serious gap in knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

Maree's process is defined not only by a sense of cultural urgency, but also, often, by a practical urgency. It's not uncommon to have tight deadlines to finish pieces in time for an exhibition. The work is painstaking, labour-intensive, and often physically demanding. Mitch notes that, "The speed in which we make these items can only be done with the help of other people".<sup>45</sup> Maree's artworks are the result of many hours sitting and working alongside family and friends as co-creators and collaborators. Her sculptural works are large-scale and multidisciplinary, qualities that lend themselves to many hands contributing. The breadth of Maree's creative ambitions also means experimenting with new techniques and materials, before passing on these methods to a community of collaborators.

The early 2019 backyard workshops involved long days of cleaning, stripping, dyeing, painting, assembling, gluing, sewing, drilling, and threading. Alongside Maree's family, Elders, and old friends, were researchers and their families, and graduate students who participated

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<sup>44</sup> Mahoney, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

<sup>45</sup> Mahoney, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

in these open spaces of knowledge-sharing and making. Maree guided the process while others listened, learned, and shared their own stories. The students took enthusiastically to the task of working with native materials—possum skins, kangaroo teeth and sinew, river reeds, cockatoo feathers, and echidna quills. They came from diverse backgrounds, and included visiting Asian migrants, international students from China, a local Jewish student, and other white Australians. The cultural and generational diversity of the group meant that the dialogues were not simply a binary exchange between black and white Australia, or a straightforward exercise in ‘awareness-raising’ aimed at non-Aboriginal people. Instead, the backyard was a dynamic space of cultural and social exchange, reflecting different relations of teaching, learning, creative experimentation, and aesthetic expression.<sup>46</sup> Maree remarks about the international students who were keen participants in her art-making:

The young girls from China, that was great sitting at the table when we were doing the [...] possum skin cloak, or might have been the necklace. [...] just talking about both Australia and China, about their different provinces and areas, and culture, practises and language. You don’t think about China as having different languages and customs and stuff too, but they do, just like us. The similarities and stuff, it’s great.<sup>47</sup>

Discussions of cultural difference in Australia have long been marked by a bifurcation in which Indigenous and multicultural issues are allocated

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<sup>46</sup> This is true in all of Maree’s practice as an artist, as well as a curator. For a recent example, see Thorner *et al*, *The Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*, in which we discuss *Bla(c)k Femmes Bla(c)k Visions*, an exhibition Maree curated at the Wyndham Art Gallery in 2019 celebrating the overlapping and divergent experiences of bla(c)kness between African immigrants and Aboriginal women in Australia.

<sup>47</sup> Clarke, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

to separate institutional and scholarly domains.<sup>48</sup> In the last couple of decades, a handful of scholars have started to address this divide by examining both historical and contemporary connections between Aboriginal and Asian-Australians.<sup>49</sup> Maree's diverse collaborators reflect these connections. The backyard is a site that defies reductive understandings of cultural difference, and enacts novel practices of intercultural and intergenerational knowledge-sharing and conviviality.<sup>50</sup> Such dialogues between migrant communities and Indigenous Australians can lead to alliances that have the potential to undermine white Australian colonial structures.<sup>51</sup>

The notion of generosity offers a productive way of thinking through Indigenous-led, intercultural collaboration. Maree's work (together with other matriarchs in this movement) and the wider project of cultural revivification, is made possible because of a willingness to share stories, skills and ideas with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This practice of generosity decentres the individual artist and proprietary no-

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<sup>48</sup> Stephenson, P. (2003). New Cultural Scripts: Exploring the Dialogue between Indigenous and 'Asian' Australians. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27(77), 57-68.

<sup>49</sup> For example, see Curthoys, A. (2000). An Uneasy Conversation: The Multicultural and the Indigenous. In Docker, J. and Fischer, G. (Eds.). *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand* (21-36). Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.

<sup>50</sup> Thorner *et al*, The Living Archive of Aboriginal Art.

<sup>51</sup> Ramsay, G. (2004). The Chinese Diaspora in Torres Strait. In Shukul, A., Ramsay, G. and Nagata, Y. (Eds). *Navigating Boundaries: The Asian Diaspora in Torres Strait* (53-79). Canberra, ACT: Pandanus Books, 30; also Sengmany, S. (2006). Re-Configuring the Diasporic and Indigenous in the Art of Zhou Xiaoping. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 27(1-2), 29-44, 29. Several contemporary artists foreground their own mixed heritage in their art practice: Vernon Ah Kee and Jimmy Chi, for example, embrace both their Indigenous and Chinese cultures and expressions, and mobilize their own mixedness to critique Australian black/white and Indigenous/multicultural binaries. Indigenous Australian curator Djon Mundine curated a 2014 show including Gary Lee, Sandra Hill, and Jason Wing, in Guangzhou's Art and Design Factory in China. And Fiona Foley's *Nulla 4 Eva* (2009) photographic series visually performs contested relationships between white, black, and multicultural Australia.



**[Fig. 5].** Checking 50 meter River Reed Necklace, Maree's Backyard, 2019. Image shows student volunteers, Fenglin and Narci, with Maree Clarke. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy of the artists.

tions of cultural ownership that are valorised in Western art-making.<sup>52</sup>  
As one student comments about her work on Maree's archive:

It flew in the face [of] that idea of the art-making process being under one author. Someone [...] in their own studio making by themselves [...] it was just such a really different [process].<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Becker, H.S. (1982). *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press was a landmark text that first destabilized the idea of art as the output of an individual genius; he argued for artworks as products of all the social actors of an art world who help to bring it into fruition (including suppliers, dealers, critics, consumers); see also Toynbee, J. (2013). How Special? Cultural Work, Copyright, Politics. In Banks, M., Gill, R. and S. Taylor (Eds.). *Theorising Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries* (85-98). London: Routledge, for an exploration of the tension between the enduring myth of artist-as-genius, and the growing body of scholarship within cultural and media studies—now for about 30 years—that critiques and destabilizes this.

<sup>53</sup> Student Volunteer, Nadia. (2019, 21 May). *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art* [Group Discussion], Student Volunteer's Focus Group Discussion, Melbourne, Vic. Australia.

Maree makes a similar point when she describes how she is different from other artists, who maintain the myth of the individual genius by being secretive about their creative process: “[They enjoy] keeping it all hush-hush until the big reveal at the exhibition opening. Whereas I love the process, I love sharing that space and knowledge”.<sup>54</sup> This emphasis on cultural sharing in Maree’s work reflects collective approaches to Indigenous art-making more widely.<sup>55</sup>

While Aboriginal cultural interconnections begin with family and Country, they are also expressed through wider relations of reciprocity. Returning to Moreton-Robinson, a deep interrelatedness between self, others, and the earth is foundational to how Indigenous women shape their worlds:

The life histories of Indigenous women show a moral ordering of sociality that emphasizes mutual support and concern for those with whom they are interconnected. Their ontological relationship to home and place facilitates this connectedness and belonging. While this ontology is omnipresent, it is rarely visible, often elusive, and most often unrecognizable for many non-Indigenous people in their intersubjective relations with Indigenous people.<sup>56</sup>

The backyard art-making workshops offer possibilities for making the ‘rarely visible’, visible, and foster an intercultural ‘community of

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<sup>54</sup> Clarke, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

<sup>55</sup> Our thinking about Indigenous art-making, artworlds, and intercultural co-production, is greatly influenced by the work of Fred Myers; see for example Myers, F. (2002). *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*. Durham: NC: Duke University Press.

<sup>56</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 15.

practice'.<sup>57</sup> These processes were guided by Maree's generosity as a pragmatic strategy for 'getting things done', but also for building relationships that expand and consolidate Indigenous knowledges among broadly defined spaces of community collaboration.

Feminist philosopher Rosalyn Diprose suggests that generosity is fundamental to projects of social justice. Diprose argues against a utilitarian notion of generosity as gift-giving, which privileges individual autonomy and the "logic of an exchange economy".<sup>58</sup> Maree's communal art-making process involves a generosity premised on an "openness to others that not only precedes and establishes communal relations but constitutes the self as open to otherness".<sup>59</sup> Rather than viewing collective art-making as a process which risks diminishing her status as a singular genius, Maree sees art-making as an opportunity to affirm respect for Aboriginal custodianship. Unlike a gift-giving paradigm which burdens individuals with an obligation to reciprocate,<sup>60</sup> Maree's practices of generosity help to foster communal bonds that instil a collective sense of responsibility for Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Maree looks after the visitors to her studio, guiding and instructing them, while making sure they are fed and refreshed. When two Chinese students expressed their interest in attending the Mildura opening—the exhibition in Maree's hometown for which they'd contributed to the art-making—she offered to accommodate them at her sister's house. Paying attention to how Maree is producing intercultural community through these forms of hospitality encourages respect for the cultural work of

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<sup>57</sup> Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>58</sup> Diprose, R. (2002). *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Mauss, M. (1990). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (translated by W.D. Halls). New York: W.W. Norton.



[Fig. 6]. Maree Clarke and student volunteer, Fenglin, Maree's Backyard, 2019. Maree and Fenglin staining the possum skin cloak with black dye. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy of the artist.

women like Maree, and for Aboriginal ways of being and connecting. Moreton-Robinson asserts that this is a modality through which Indigenous women negotiate their subjectivity and reckon with dominant non-Indigenous knowledges.<sup>61</sup>

As is evident in the examples above, Maree's art-making encourages *embodied* forms of intercultural learning. The participants in Maree's workshops did not just acquire new forms of knowledge, or learn about Aboriginal culture in a theoretical way, but lived a complex encounter between Aboriginal and other knowledge systems. These experiences offer her collaborators intimate and situated insight into Indigenous

<sup>61</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*. Brisbane, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 20-21.

ways of knowing, being, and doing things.<sup>62</sup> Making-together is an Indigenous matriarchal mode of transmitting knowledge (consider the stark difference between these backyard workshops—as described and pictured above—and learning in a Western university context) that relies on expansive notions of kinship, community, reciprocity, and generosity to extend knowledge into the future.

## **6. Eel Traps: Art, Community, and Archive-Making**

The collaborations and exhibitions that are part of Maree’s artworld still operate within colonised structures. Historian Patrick Wolfe argues that colonialism continues as a ‘structure’, rather than ‘an event’ that ends at the point of colonisation.<sup>63</sup> While Maree’s backyard is an Indigenous space, it is also bound by the restrictions of a colonial regime. She does not own her house, but rents it—despite having Ancestral connections to the Country on which she lives. In other words, Maree’s inalienable sovereignty over unceded lands is both ignored and overwhelmed by notions of property embedded in the capitalist nation-state. Projects of decolonisation emerge from these highly-contested places and ideas.

Maree’s 2019 eel traps, commissioned as contemporary art objects, were also simultaneously and necessarily projects of intervention into Western institutions and their enduring colonial structures. The first was a translation and transformation of the traditional form into glass via a collaboration with Canberra Glassworks; the second was a community collaboration supersizing the original form into an organic sculpture that was ultimately returned to a traditional waterway. Together, they made

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<sup>62</sup> Martin and Miraboopa, *Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing*.

<sup>63</sup> Wolfe, P. (1994). *Nation and Miscegenation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era*. *Social Analysis*, 36, 93-152, 96.

visible Indigenous knowledge of the land and its flora and fauna, and exemplified Blak matriarchal ways of transmitting knowledge: sharing via co-creating, and preserving via innovating, re-iterating, re-animating.

The University of Melbourne commissioned Maree Clarke to make the eel traps for two very different contexts: a prestigious institution of higher learning, and a community-based arts organisation. When considered together, the creation and exhibition of these two art objects reveal the complexity of incorporating Indigenous sovereignty into and, indeed, decolonising Western institutions. Translation between organic materials and new technologies, Indigenous knowledge and ‘high art’ worlds, are recursive processes that exemplify Maree’s dual drive—to innovate in her own artistic practice, and to widen the possibilities of knowledge sharing and exchange. In this penultimate section, then, we return to the 2019 eel traps as objectifications of Indigenous matriarchal (‘ontological’ in the sense of Moreton-Robinson) connections to Country, asserting that art-making is archive-making, and that these processes of making are the hard work of insisting on the inalienability (and endurance) of Indigenous sovereignty in the context of Western institutions as enduring colonial structures.

#### *Old Quad: Ancestral Memory*

The University of Melbourne is the second oldest University in Australia, established in 1853. The Quadrangle (Old Quad) was the University’s first building. Its Tudor Gothic design reflects the traditional style for “historic seats of learning”.<sup>64</sup> After extensive renovations, the Old Quad

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<sup>64</sup> Waghorne, J. (2019). The Quadrangle. In *Old Quad* [Exhibition Catalogue] (12-17). Melbourne: University of Melbourne, Parkville, 13.



**[Fig. 7].** Ancestral Memory (Glass Eel Trap), 3 meters, by Maree Clarke. Ancestral Memory, Old Quad, University of Melbourne, May 6-Oct 11, 2019. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne.

reopened in 2019 with an exhibition space, housing the inaugural exhibition *Ancestral Memory*. Maree led the production of the exhibition's centrepiece—a glass eel trap signifying and stylising enduring, ongoing Indigenous connections to Country.

The three-metre-long eel trap consisted of a series of concentric clear-glass circular ribbons, which lit the interior of the dark and heavily panelled walls of the gothic building, and floated above the surface of a mirrored platform. Hanging directly opposite the glass eel trap, at the other end of the gallery space, were two woven eel traps made in the 1990s by master weavers Aunty Connie Hart and Aunty Elaine Terrick (Gunnai/Bidawal). These works, made from natural fibres, contrasted with the luminescent glass eel trap at the other end of the space. Viewed together, the exhibited objects visibly revealed the ongoing skills and



**[Fig. 8].** Woven Eel Traps x 3, 1988-1994, made from natural fibres/grasses ranging in size from 39cm x 197 x 43cm to 49cm x 12.7 x 55.9cm, by Connie Hart (Gunditjmara) and Edith Terrick (Gunnai/Kurnai/Bidawal) with Patrick Bellamy. Collection of the Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne. River Reed Necklaces x 5 (2014–2017) made with wax thread and galah, parrot and cockatoo feathers, 50 meters long, by Maree Clarke. Ancestral Memory, Old Quad, University of Melbourne, May 6–Oct 11, 2019. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy of the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne.

knowledge required for eel-trap making, juxtaposing old and new ways of telling stories, while highlighting contemporary reinterpretations of an ancient practice.

Accompanying the display was a wall text-panel, an edited version of information contained in the brief exhibition catalogue. The catalogue told the story of the waterways that once flowed across the land now occupied by the university. These accommodated the eels that today continue to swim through the stormwater pipes located beneath the

buildings.<sup>65</sup> A short essay also discussed Maree's work in relation to the contemporary nature of the glass eel trap, its historic and cultural connections to the woven eel traps of the 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Artists' talks conducted throughout the exhibition period saw Maree and Mitch discuss their ambitions to expand their art practices through new mediums and technologies. *Ancestral Memory*, as an exhibition title, was for Maree an ideal metaphor highlighting the resilience of Aboriginal people (and eels), demonstrating the interconnectedness of everything—fundamental to understanding Indigenous knowledge systems. Yet, while the exhibition was aesthetically stunning, it also presented a “challenging and complex set of statements” about the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the academy, and more broadly about the way Aboriginal art is represented.<sup>67</sup>

For Maree, the artist commission was synergistic with her ongoing drive to push her own practice into new media forms, and her insistence on recognition that Indigenous people and their knowledge, embedded in Country, persist—despite colonisation. *Ancestral Memory* visually and thematically suggested the presence, beauty, and innovation of Indigenous peoples, and was an important disruption to the dominance of Western knowledge on these lands/waters. However, the exhibition did little to engage with the broader Aboriginal community. There were few opportunities for local Elders and community groups to visit or

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<sup>65</sup> Greenaway, J. and Comte, S. (2019). The Water Story. In *Ancestral Memory* [Exhibition Catalogue] (4-7). Melbourne: Old Quad, University of Melbourne.

<sup>66</sup> Edmonds, F. (2019). Maree Clarke: Glass Eel Trap and River Reed Necklaces. In *Ancestral Memory* [Exhibition Catalogue] (8-9). Melbourne: Old Quad, University of Melbourne.

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of the National Portrait Gallery of Australia's attempts to innovatively disrupt conventional exhibition methods via representations of Aboriginal peoples' contributions to 'nation building' through portraits, see Hinkson, M. (2010). Seeing More than Black and White: Picturing Aboriginality at Australia's National Portrait Gallery. *Australian Humanities Review*, 49, 5-28, 12.

participate in *Ancestral Memory*. The exhibition remained largely confined to an educated elite, with academically-oriented floor talks and restricted viewing hours. The Old Quad as a building is physically, historically, and socially embedded within colonial structures. It is the first university building imposed on the lands of the Kulin Nations and remains a place of exclusion for many Indigenous and minority groups.

*Ancestral Memory* and its focal point glass eel trap reveal the work being done and the work still needed for the academy to come to terms with Aboriginal sovereignty. As Aboriginal legal scholar Irene Watson (Tanganekald/Meintangk Boandik) writes:

To make up for the historic and ongoing erasures of Aboriginal knowledges, there is a need to centre Aboriginal world-views as the norm, and an attempt to liberate space from the vast coverage of colonising and assimilationist processes.<sup>68</sup>

Such opportunities for supporting two-way learning,<sup>69</sup> where Indigenous knowledge is given equal space, have recently been considered by the University of Melbourne, in collaboration with Footscray Community Arts Centre. This program included another eel trap story, one with connections to *Ancestral Memory*.

#### *Footscray Community Arts Centre: Disposable*

Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC) was established in 1974, emerging out of Australia's nascent community arts movement, and

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<sup>68</sup> Watson, I. (2011). Aboriginal(ising) International Law and Other Centres of Power. *Griffith Law Review*, 20(3), 619-640, 634.

<sup>69</sup> See Huijser, H., Ober, R., O'Sullivan, S., McRae-Williams, E. and Elvin, R. (Eds.). (2015). *Finding the Common Ground: Narratives, Provocations and Reflections from the 40 Year Celebration of Batchelor Institute*. Northern Territory: Batchelor Press.

supported by a growing recognition of the cultural needs of diverse and 'marginal' communities. While it began in response to the area's working class population and growing migrant constituencies, it has, over time, become more committed to engaging with local Aboriginal communities and cultural leaders—and is guided in its intercultural and Indigenous programs by an Indigenous Advisory Group. Today FCAC mobilises an open-ended vision of community that forges connections between these different cultural knowledges and histories.<sup>70</sup> Its curatorial strategies emphasise an intersectional approach that complements Maree's intercultural art-making process. While the Centre has long focused on its 'local' community, in practice, this has meant encouraging diverse communities to participate in myriad forms of cultural exchange.

The Science Gallery at the University of Melbourne supported a second eel-trap project in July 2019 at FCAC, as part of a larger program of exhibitions titled *Disposable - Reimagining Your Waste*, focusing on ecological sustainability and waste reduction. While the large-scale eel trap was not a waste product, its purpose was to raise awareness of continuing Indigenous environmental knowledge in relation to the gathering and use of biodegradable resources. The resources drew on Indigenous practices of knowing where and what to gather and to only take what was required to ensure environmental sustainability. On completion, the eel trap was carried to the banks of the Maribyrnong River, becoming a momentary outdoor installation embedded in the landscape and bound to return to its origins, where it would float away

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<sup>70</sup> See Khan, R. (2015). *Art in Community. The Provisional Citizen*. London: Palgrave Pivot. Community—especially for Indigenous people living in urban areas, who may or may not have well-defined connections to their homelands—is primarily about networks of relations. Community is not fixed, but is dynamic, negotiated, and produced; see Dowell, K. (2013). *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 35-49.



[Fig. 9]. Completed River Reed Eel Trap, approx. 10 meters, river reeds, grasses and stringy bark, floating in Maribyrnong River, Melbourne, September 2019. Eel Trap, Footscray Community Arts Centre, July 31- Aug 31, 2019. Photo: Maree Clarke. Courtesy of the artists.

and decompose back into the waters that gave life to the resources used for its making.

The eel trap was made from locally-sourced river reeds, grasses and stringy-bark (tough fibrous strands from a eucalyptus tree). Initially, young Science Gallery curators were invited to accompany Maree and Mitch in the collecting of river reeds from the nearby Maribyrnong River. Early construction of the eel trap began in Maree's backyard, with curators working alongside Mitch to begin the process of bending reeds to form the first of many concentric circles required for the organic cone-shaped structure. The project then shifted to a series of formalised workshops, July-August 2019, conducted at FCAC. These were open to



**[Fig. 10].** Super-sized River Reed Eel Trap in progress, river reeds, local grasses and stringy bark. Showing community volunteers and Maree Clarke. Eel Trap, Footscray Community Arts Centre, July 31- Aug 31, 2019. Photo: Fran Edmonds. Courtesy of the artists.

the public and led by Mitch, under Maree's guidance, and included working with a team of young Indigenous FCAC and Science Gallery curators.

The workshops attracted hundreds of people across four weeks, and included an eclectic cross-section of people from university and school groups, practising artists, members of the Aboriginal community, Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. Friends, colleagues and family of Mitch and Maree were also regular contributors. The adaptation of an eel-trap, a traditional farming tool, into an organic and supersized sculpture transformed art-making into community-mobilizing and community-making. Indigenous knowledge of the land and its resources guided the making-together, and, under the theme of the program,



[Fig. 11]. River Reed Eel Trap (2019) early construction with Science Gallery, Maree's Backyard, March 2019. Photo: Maree Clarke. Courtesy of the artists.

asserted Indigenous knowledge as deeply relevant in climate-crisis activism for greater ecological sustainability.

The works of Indigenous scholars Bruce Pascoe (Bunurong / Yuin / Palawa)<sup>71</sup> and Zena Cumpston (Barkindji)<sup>72</sup> recognise the imperative to transfer Indigenous knowledge of Country into the terms of environmental sustainability as a form of pragmatic generosity. Indigenous knowledge systems, sustained for thousands of years and made both tangible and contemporary in this community-making of an eel trap,

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<sup>71</sup> Pascoe, B. (2017). *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* Broome, Australia: Magabala Books.

<sup>72</sup> Cumpston, Z. and Bear, T. (2019, May 7). *Plants Tell Stories Of Cultural Connection*. Pursuit. University of Melbourne.  
<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/plants-tell-stories-of-cultural-connection>.



**[Fig. 12].** Collecting resources for River Reed Eel Trap (2019), Maribyrnong River, Melbourne, Maree Clarke, Mitch Mahoney (background) and Science Gallery mediators/curators. Photo: Nicholas Hovington. Courtesy of the artists.

exemplify the urgency of the Living Archive project, and signal its (potential) global relevance.

## 7. Conclusion

The archive as a living entity, emerging from Maree's backyard and extending to the University of Melbourne, the Footscray Community Art Centre, to generations of kin and students, is neither static nor fixed in place or time, but instead contests the structures and power relations of Western institutions and offers an alternative to them. Maree's generosity enables others to participate in, and learn about, Aboriginal art and relationships to land. Within this system, the relationality and interconnectedness of everything reveal **art-making** as a process connected to understanding Aboriginal 'ways of doing' things, which in turn support **archive-making** as a function for ensuring Aboriginal

stories/histories and ‘ways of knowing’ are continued across generations and cultures. This process supports **sovereignty-claiming**—the recognition of Aboriginal people’s unceded rights to Country and ‘ways of being’—and when considered alongside the inclusiveness and generosity fostered by Maree’s art-making in her backyard, potentially leads to **community-making**. ‘Art-making is archive-making is sovereignty-claiming is community-making’ offers a model for rethinking Western knowledge systems by re-situating Indigenous knowledge as the ‘norm’, alongside and equal to Western knowledge within cultural institutions, which is possible to envisage through Maree’s work as a matriarch, knowledge-holder, and artist.

Returning to our beginning, then, the eels are a food source and an index of deep Indigenous knowledge of the earth and the interconnectedness of all living beings. The eels are also a metaphor for the Living Archive we are building, exemplifying processes of regeneration and return that are outside the structures of colonialism. This offers much to consider if we are to progress sustainable and practical approaches for supporting knowledge exchange across cultures and generations. As Mitch acknowledges:

It’s about breaking down those barriers between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people, in terms of sharing knowledge [...], sharing experiences. [...] Inviting people to come along and be involved in whatever project, no matter where they’re from. That then breaks down the barriers or people

having fear about asking Aboriginal people questions, and closing that [off].<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Mahoney, *Living Archive of Aboriginal Art*.

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