

## **A conduit of cultural learning: holding, telling, remembering.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper relates the story of an informed cultural design within Indigenous education, business practice, and creative arts theory as a significant language of sovereignty. The paper is descriptive of and considerate to the theory and praxis enfolded within Indigenous cultural practice and cultural sustainability as reflected through *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition held at a university gallery in Gippsland. This study is an analysis of praxis from the point of view of the author-researcher who is on this occasion *artist, educator and curator*. Cultural sustainability, economic viability and art as pedagogy intersect: in this sense, as both place-pedagogy and more generally cultural wisdom. The other juncture that is interpreted through an Indigenous perspective in this research lies within the way a large number of Indigenous artists can come together to create a contiguous story where the art narrative itself is a performative experience. Knowledge holders were from diverse places, including Niue, Tasmania, Aotearoa, Flinders Ranges, Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri, Taungurung, Gunnai-Kurnai. Within this context, cultural exchange resonates with ancient trade routes to create learning spaces of collaboration. This process is transformative learning for those who participate in cross-cultural exchange (non-Indigenous), and important for Indigenous participants by increasing depth of community learning from cultural practitioners who are Elders and knowledge holders. This paper asserts the importance of cultural exchange and sharing of cultural knowledge through several mediums. It discusses inspirational ways that contemporary visual technologies have facilitated the sharing of traditional knowledge within the shared spaces of exhibition and as a conduit for cultural holding and telling of knowledge. Traditional craft making in practice, is more than just about the artefact of material culture, as objects become vehicles of story and environment. Visual narrative regarding connection to natural history and Country in the public domain through exhibition and gatherings, are part of a methodology incorporating traditional value systems that also embrace contemporary ways of being and doing. These uphold ancient wisdom and disseminate knowledge for the future of our cultural practices.

### **Introduction**

#### **Indigenous pedagogy**

The aim of this paper is to analyse through qualitative observations the processes involved in Indigenous art-making, and art as pedagogy. Within the text of this paper the reader may observe, how at once I am inside and then outside the research experience. Rather than a flaw I have begun to realise this is idiomatic of my research *telling* as an Indigenous researcher, and indeed as a curator, then artist. This study affirms that the Indigenous artist's voice reflects a sovereign stance, by way of a number of strong messages and visual assertion. In recounting reflections and critiquing the success of *When All the Rivers Run* Exhibition, Gippsland 2014, the powerful remembrance of the significance of water becomes almost a background noise, as we all connect and are awash with our shared voice. The study analyses, as well, how Indigenous art practice reflects concepts of economic initiative and cultural

maintenance through a lens adopted from eastern thought and progressive ideas from the 1970s. With this in mind the paper asserts that different research tools are needed to give proper relevance to the issues the paper elucidates, and has a beginning analysis of this as a research challenge.

### *The Story*

This is a valuable narrative of sharing within a community pedagogy and gallery context. This account of *When All the Rivers Run* describes how Indigenous communities can come together in mutual support with a design promoting and holding cultural authority. Through a variety of forms of art practice the assembly of artists who participated in this project have succeeded in producing a powerful unified vision of traditional knowledge systems, both seen and experienced. The account is lucid, but in voices from different times with the excerpts from the exhibition catalogue: as the ‘exhibition’s voice’ (Heckenberg, 2014) in quotation marks. Therefore, by your leave, you as reader can distil the nature of the exhibition voice from the more present researcher’s voice. They are both the author, but with different hats. The exhibition catalogue began with an introduction- written by the author as collector and curator.

### Exhibition Voice

“I would like to acknowledge that we are standing in GunaiKurnai Country and give respect to their Ancient and Contemporary Traditional ties to this Land. I would also like to acknowledge the Elders past and present of the Traditional Owners of this Land and acknowledge all Elders and Aboriginal people of all Nations who stand in this Place.

The *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition is produced in a spirit of cultural exchange and relies as much on our commonalities as Indigenous peoples, as it does on our common work in community and in global contexts. The array of artists in this exhibition also includes non-indigenous people who we work alongside and value as mentors, colleagues, facilitators, partners and soul-mates.” (Heckenberg 2014)

### *Aesthetic appeal and Indigenous pedagogies*

Through creative arts theory and impressions acquired from understandings associated with community arts design, this study is offering an examination of Indigenous exhibition work that is its own pedagogy. Art provides an easily digestible and enjoyable way to experience the artefacts of culture, and the project was encouraged by the fact that the senior artists involved have a keen awareness of their significance as local leaders, spokespeople and teachers. The purpose here is to distinguish established Indigenous pedagogies within this project that teach important lessons about our feeling for Country and our relationships to our lands. This exhibition work, also, resonated with success stories regarding combining business practice with art-making. The larger intent however, is always about educating the audience. The overarching story is sovereign voices, realising that the continent of Australia has been Aboriginal land since the beginning of time. Within Indigenous visual arts practice this is a language of being.

Certainly realising it, but never *making a thing of it*, the artists quietly portrayed their very affirming perspective of sovereign authority, of itself a lesson for the audience:

The cultural representation of country has, no doubt, an aesthetic dimension, but the beauty thus presented also has a political dimension. Aesthetics can be politics carried out by other means, for what one learns to value in landscape, indeed, what is included in the frame, enables the promotion of what is considered valuable and worthy as an object of aspiration.

(Muecke 2004, p.71)

The visual arts presented in *When All the Rivers Run* are indeed political voices, spoken calmly and with aesthetic appeal, but with the conviction of the connection and the spiritual knowing of belonging to Aboriginal Land. Truly speaking, for these Aboriginal artists, it is not so much about “aspiration” (Muecke 2004, p. 71) but about ratification. It is fair to say that Indigenous arts has given opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community people largely because of the unique position that art practice claims and provides for our people (Janke 1999). Within the development of Aboriginal art education, for example, self-efficacy and self-knowledge, including cultural knowledge and a highly professional skill set are part of endeavour (Heckenberg 2012). From the point of view of an educator, art education programmes can provide very adequate pathways into higher education (Heckenberg 2012, pp.76-88).

Our Koorie Footprints to Higher Education project, for example, which began as a small project in Gippsland, but like Topsy developed and grew, enabled a community of Indigenous artists to seek control of their cultural and economic visions. There are representations of Koorie Footprints presented in this show, to remind the community of the Koorie Footprints studio work and to celebrate the artists who found a pathway into further art-learning through that programme (Heckenberg, Clarke and Zizys 2009). The study here provides a more gestated, and a more gesticulated record of how this same community shared a visual dialogue beyond Koorie Footprints with committed artists from a broad range of backgrounds. Related here in this paper is a narrative about a committed society of artists, spanning several countries, and a number of Indigenous nations.

### *Curator as an Agent for Pedagogy*

This account was assembled by the author as an integral part of being the *hunter and gatherer*, and co-curator of an outstanding exhibition (collaboration with Rodney Forbes, Director of Gippsland Centre of Art and Design and Neale Stratford, Gallery Technician working at the art school at Gippsland and Switchback Gallery, Churchill). The account is brought together as a dynamic engagement of artists asserting a paradigm of kinship and sovereign explication. Each artist’s work explained something of their tribal concerns: history, geography, nature. The diversity also held commonality, as is the usual case with such responsive gatherings. Unique as well to the success of narrative-telling in public places like galleries and museums, is the very particular role played by the curator. In this case many years of regular shows and exhibition hangings by Rodney and Neale, ensured that the artwork provided a dynamic story, each piece of the story leading to the next. As a well-curated exhibition the artworks spoke to each other. My personal contribution was my Wiradjuri viewpoint, an ontological stance. At the beginning of the show was the work by Ronald Edwards, a local Gunnai artist who was showing his newest work.

He did the Welcome to Country, so Gunnai work greeted the viewer as a first port of call. The work when read to the end provided a complete sovereign statement, interspersed by non-indigenous friends who related notions of contemporary place and junctures of belonging. The narrative ended with a piece by Aunty Rachel Mullett, wife of Elder Uncle Albert, an apical ancestor of the next generations, a reference point for memory and acclaim, a visual description of traditional craft, common place yet, culturally illustrious and thoroughly connected to country. From the exhibition catalogue story came a common theme that is in the hearts of all the artists with regard to country and to water. Water is necessary for our very existence. Traditionally, Aboriginal people would look after the waterways and look after the water soaks as sacred places, valuable and valued. With the imposition of western water management regimes, the natural flow (cultural flow) of our water has been compromised. Celebrating our relationship to the water is healing to our land and waterways. On the floor of the exhibition space (our conceptual continuum) was a representation of the River, like a snake she wove her way, grounded and singular in intent: to be a healer for the space. She was made up of many little canvases, dozens of them, but unified as one creature, like the exhibition itself.

## A Potent Tale

### Inside the Story

“Some of the features of this exhibition that reflect the contributions of the artists included here, rely on strong association with Country and our life blood, water. This exhibition is called *When All the Rivers Run*, so captures associations with river country. Within a broader Indigenous perspective, this includes a reliance on the coastal story as well, because many of our rivers run or flow into the sea and therefore are part of that conduit of telling story, too. It is apt therefore that our story in GunaiKurnai Country begins with Ronald Edwards’ work of Borun and Tuk, as our introduction into this exhibition. Borun’s story is very much about the journey of learning on the river and the coast, so here we begin. This is also an Apical Ancestor Creation story.” (Heckenberg 2014).

The Borun and Tuk story provides a powerful and enduring story of GunaiKurnai connection to the Mountains, the Rivers and the Sea, as well as some of the important landmarks in the Clan Country of the GunaiKurnai. It also provides a love story as Borun the Pelican, and Tuk, the Musk Duck, marry each other and become the forbears of the people of Gippsland, themselves. He went from Krowathunkooloong, Clan country where there is the Snowy River, and places like Buchan, Black mountain and Mount Nowa Nowa. At Tatungooloong Clan country he was at Lakes Entrance on the coast, and the Ninety Mile beach. He went through Brabawooloong people’s country where there is Mitchell River, Nicholson River, and the Tambo River. The Tambo River is the location where Gunnai painter Ray Thomas depicted the murder of his ancestors. The little boys in the depiction were taken to the mission, and became the Thomas and Thorpe old people (Floor talk Ray Thomas 2006). Then Borun saw Brayakooloong countryman landforms, including the Avon River, where there is a significant site for the Gunnai. This was a place where Uncle Albert Mullett used to come to teach the children and teach the grown-ups about the GunaiKurnai way of life. Ray Thomas says that Borun ended up down at Wilsons Promontory; this is the clan country of Bratwoloong (Ray Thomas 2006).

Ever since the Bark Petition (Yunupingu 1997, pp.1-17), the idea of art representing a sovereign statement regarding one's relationship to the Land has become part of authority over country and the realms of cultural and environmental knowledge. Again this kind of statement of attachment to land was reinforced in Australian law with regard to the Nurrara Great Sandy Desert Painting of the Canning Stock Route. This became evidence of continuing connection to Country, and successfully was used to gain Native Title for those traditional owners with their stories specific to place (Behrendt 2008).

### Cultural Wisdom

The *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition highlighted the way Indigenous practice can be evaluated through a theory and praxis model, in this case embracing important notions such as maintaining and protecting culture (see Davis, Janke and Holcombe 2009), or in a more contemporary pronouncement of intent, supporting cultural sustainability. This study is an analysis of praxis from the point of view of the author-researcher who is on this occasion *artist, educator and curator*. Cultural sustainability, economic viability and art as pedagogy intersect: in this sense, as both place-pedagogy and more generally cultural wisdom. Community language has loosely turned from 'maintaining and protecting culture' to being inclusive as well of international concepts of 'cultural sustainability', as a mirror of the new politics engaging sustainability and quality of life (Ehrenfeld 2008).

### *Sustainability and Spiritual Health*

"Sustainability" is a call to the world to stop destroying the Earth, to contract into policies that can be sustained, be this in relation to practices regarding the environment, electricity, water usage and so on. Gardner (1989) talks about the beginnings of theories and practice around sustainability as arising from environmental considerations. It is easy to think that issues regarding sustainability arose in the twenty first century, as this is when most of the research and innovation has taken place, but Gardner cites "precursors" as far back as 1973 with authors such as Schumacher with *Small is Beautiful*. Schumacher, in typical early seventies wisdom populates ideas of harmonious understanding of the spirit and the physical being. A profound point he makes comes from Buddhist thought and resonates so well with the cultural sustainability discourse, "Spiritual health and material well-being are not enemies: they are natural allies" (Schumacher 1989, p.56). From an analysis reliant on Buddhist economics, Schumacher (1989, p.58) asserts the ability for human beings to take control of their own means of production by enhancing skills and power, rather than giving this over to the power of the machine. His idea seems essential for economic and cultural sustainability into the future. The craftsman holds the means of art-making and artefact-making in his own hands. This is the wealth of Aboriginal cultural practices, honed from traditional knowledge over millennia, deserving of economic opportunity through knowledge and skill. Schumacher explains this self-empowerment through the ancient Buddhist viewpoint, which resonates so well with the Aboriginal standpoint. To explain further, he employs the Indian philosopher and economist J.C. Kumarappa who was writing with the philosophies of Gandhi in 1945. Schumacher in 1973 (1989, p. 59) says "If the nature of the work is properly appreciated and applied, it will stand in the same relation to the higher faculties as food is to the physical body" (Schumacher 1989,

p.59). Kumarappa (1945) acknowledges that this “nourishes and enlivens the higher man and urges him to produce the best he is capable of “ (Kumarappa 1945, p. 99), going to the place where human freewill takes us the proper way. Kumarappa (1945) maintains that we are capable of “progressive channels” where such practice “furnishes an excellent background for man to display his scale of values and develop his personality” (Kumarappa 1945, p.99). This is the place where the performative nature of art-making, being part of an audience of goodwill, and the eloquence of the story becomes the breeding ground of learning from each other. This experiencing of connection to each other can produce a contagion of fond regard. The other part of the cycle in which Kumarappa plays in the role of this critique is that he believed in an economy that could be self-sustaining, again feeding into Indigenous theory on being able to protect and maintain culture, and indeed find ways of creative practice that generate pathways of financial gain.

On the other side of the coin is the practical work of ensuring an artist’s work is protected in the eyes of Commonwealth law. Here the work of Indigenous lawyer Terri Janke provides some security with her knowledge sharing, enabling protection of artists’ work and continuing representation of artists’ interests. In this statement for example, which is taken from a business information pack she says:

Many Indigenous people in business want to make commercial use of their cultural heritage. Indigenous language words, traditional knowledge of bush tucker and medicines or information about cultural sites and traditional cultural expression such as songs and dances and art are some examples of indigenous cultural and intellectual property that may be used in business. Indigenous business owners want to identify their products and services as being ‘Indigenous’ and also may have knowledge and skills handed down to them which they wish to promote in return for economic benefits. Indigenous cultural and intellectual property belongs to the group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that have culturally inherited.

Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognises that Indigenous people have the collective right to protect their cultural expression and traditional knowledge as intellectual property.

(Terri Janke and Company date unknown, p.30)

In affirming the significance of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at least on moral grounds, one needs to remember, that Australia has not ratified this document. However, Aboriginal artists are protected by the *Copyright Act 1968*, which covers all Australian artists. In the past Aboriginal artists have been ‘ripped off’ by those who take advantage of designs in the public domain. The Carpets Case is one frequently discussed (Janke 1995, p.37-39), for which damages were awarded to the designer-artist through the *Copyright Act*. Therefore protecting artwork designs continues to worry Aboriginal artists, as the significance of a design may go beyond explanation to metaphysical and “cultural significance” (Janke 1995, p.37). Sharing an art space where these issues are acknowledged, such as our *When All the Rivers Run* event adds to the enjoyment of production and being part of the learning experience and relationships.

### *Consistent Principles within Diversity*

The relationships created through sharing a culturally safe exhibition space from an Indigenous researcher’s perspective, at this juncture, lies within the way a large number of Indigenous artists can come together to create a continuous story where the

art narrative itself is a performative experience. The responsibility of the artist is not only to the audience, but also to cultural norms and traditional law and values of our ancestors.

There is a great diversity of Aboriginal cultures across Australia, each with particular cultural heritage and customary law, but there are consistent principles that govern the ownership and control of each group's Indigenous knowledge...  
(Janke and Dawson 2012, p.6)

Knowledge holders were from diverse places, including Niue, Tasmania, Aotearoa, Flinders Ranges, Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri, Taungurung, GunaiKurnai. As well as this, non-indigenous artists were also invited to participate in a spirit of conciliation. Non-indigenous artists were invited to share their ideas on how they felt about love of the land, the environment or a perspective regarding Aboriginal concerns. The experience of story-telling and sharing our knowledge with not only each other, but with the larger community produced a unique and warming experience for both artists, and the audience. Within this critique, the invitation for all to participate in the work resonates with earlier mentioned Buddhist theories of economics by Schumacher (1989/1973), in which people are enabled to "overcome... ego-centredness by joining with other people in a common task" where there is a "becoming existence" (Schumacher 1989, p. 58).

Here then is the ontological space, I assert. A "becoming existence" is such a creative imagining of human space; here it is about self-realisation. In regarding not only art practice, but also art research in this way, we are humanising the art theory and practice of the academic gaze. For example, Cynthia Dillard's (2008, p.278) Ghanaian critique explains how "counter-practices/pedagogies in qualitative research and humanizing practices/pedagogies ...move us beyond thinking of research as solely academic practice, but as practice that serves humanity through power and authority that rests within indigenous, and African people". This resonates well with the ideas of analysing our project. This kind of way of looking at pedagogy, and Indigenous place pedagogy- and indeed the products of place pedagogy, which is art product- cannot be examined by the usual western academic tools. The usual western lens of academic analysis would need to have another layer of "humanity" inserted and, an added Indigenous standpoint theory initiating a suitable focussing device. A Best Practice way of doing this is provided by Indigenous people themselves, as ancient knowledge or wisdom can be the interlocutor of the story. This is where an appreciation of the ontological voice within enquiry gains traction. This again is interesting to see through Cynthia Dillard's (2008) lens; she says:

There can be no doubt that introducing spirituality as a real and important topic in the research process invites us to reconsider deeply our positionalities in the research endeavour, to take into account new possibilities in our work, to remember intuition, and to pay special attention to what indigenous cultures can offer in terms of concrete ways to read/re-read our current situations in the world- and write them as well.  
(Dillard 2008, pp.277-278)

For the author a comprehension of Indigenous cultural knowledge requires a way of being which has a spiritual knowledge, metaphysical feeling, and accepts the spiritual force of Country. This is something well understood by the artists in *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition.

## Cross-cultural dialogue

The local numbers of people as audience were drawn from the region in Gippsland around Churchill, Traralgon and Morwell. The gallery being a university space ensured audience participation by students and staff. However, the greatest glee was on opening night when family and friends of the Indigenous artists, local community groups, and a wonderful group from the local church created a cultural exchange of their own for the evening. This cross-cultural atmosphere instigated the kinds of discussions regarding place, environmental issues and local knowledge, which well regarded kinship and cultural histories. This was a unique *feeling* for the regional gallery ambience. The feeling at the end of the night was elevated and positive. The local white and Indigenous communities reiterated old connections they had previously developed, through community projects and Indigenous entrepreneurial business practice. The gallery space is one of the few locations where an Indigenous person owns the territory around him/herself, and is listened to with authority. It is one of the reasons I have been so involved with art in education for many years.

## Language of Art

The language of art is one accessible to both higher education teachers and students alike. We may wish to educate students in this language. The *When All the Rivers Run* show became an opportunity where the Indigenous lexicon and thesaurus were on hand for the local public, the Indigenous community and the university body alike. Art has its own syntax, composition and message. Through a larger lens than the one in this paper, there is a particular discussion concerning how examples in art history are in tandem with social history and histories of our nation, and communities. The emergence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art movements contributes immeasurably to the curriculum, from McCrae to Barak (Sayers 1994) to Namatjira to Possum (Ryan 1990) to the contemporary artists of today such as Moffatt and Dowling. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story is told, to teach, to reflect upon and to learn from. Coming back now to our own *When all the rivers run*: the show told a composite story of many of the important *tellings* of history as well as the links to country and community through the language of art. As asserted earlier, in the lexicon of art, these are stories of sovereignty as well.

## Gaining Awareness

This process is transformative learning for those who participate in cross-cultural exchange (non-Indigenous), and important for Indigenous participants by increasing depth of community learning from cultural practitioners who are Elders and knowledge holders. This paper asserts the importance of cultural exchange and sharing of cultural knowledge through several mediums. It discusses inspirational ways that contemporary visual technologies have facilitated the sharing of traditional knowledge within the shared spaces of exhibition and as a conduit for cultural holding and telling of knowledge. Traditional craft making in practice, is more than just about the artefact of material culture, as objects become vehicles of story and environment. Visual narrative regarding connection to natural history and Country in the public domain through exhibition and gatherings, are part of a methodology incorporating traditional value systems that also embrace contemporary ways of being and doing. These uphold ancient wisdom and disseminate knowledge for the future of our cultural practices.

### *Authentic Values*

Andrea Veltman (2016, p.72) in recent writing speaks of the desire for authenticity in doing work, in line with the idea that meaningless work can create a state of fragmentation, and echoes the ideas of Kumarappa, the economist of Gandhi. She speaks of “human flourishing” with “capabilities for self-direction” which “not only enable people to achieve their dreams but also form a core part of human development” (Veltman 2016, p.72). As well as this she talks about how having creative autonomy links to “basic human values as dignity, respect, truthfulness, and the moral responsibility: mature and rational human beings as seen as free and responsible moral agents in virtue of our capabilities to control ourselves through the exercise of our autonomous wills, and moral agency” (Veltman 2016, p.72).

These ideas are distilled within the way that Aboriginal artists work. They intrinsically incorporate Indigenous values of being truthful and being moral agents for positive change. The senior people represented in the *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition have chosen a forum to express respectful demonstrations of looking after the environment, as well as sharing knowledge as a commitment to teaching the community traditional values.

### **So many lessons to Learn**

#### Film Text as Teacher

Within the film texts of the exhibition, for which there are three videos, the messages are powerful in the telling. For example, in the first film we are watching the men showing the young boys how to do knapping with stone and to make sharp axes and other tools that they can work with on the land. This carries not only knowledge to the next generation, but shows the audience how to behave effectively toward the young as they learn new skills. The other point about the experience within the film is seeing the gendered knowledge systems of Traditional Aboriginal society. This philosophy is respected in Aboriginal communities; this is part of a value system handed down from generation to generation. Men’s business and women’s business is not about discrimination: it is about lore.

In the next film we are watching cultural heritage worker Uncle Rod Mason working with a community made up of non-indigenous landowners and Indigenous workers who are occupied in caring for country. This helped explain the positive aspects of traditional burning regimes. This is undertaken through firestick burning, whereby not only is the country being looked after so that there is less risk of uncontrolled fires in the hot times of the year, but there is a follow on of an increase in grass and undergrowth diversity. This encourages more species of small native animals and insects, but also encourages plant species such as bush orchids, for example. The encouraging aspect for this is the partnerships formed through this venture. Caring for Country becomes a communicable theme for Black and white community together. This is a growing expression of concern for people of the Land, looking after the Land through tradition. This has also led to partnerships where native trees are planted on white properties to re-establish the old stands of trees that used to populate the countryside.

The last video shared with the gallery audience is about weaving. Aunty Sharon, who has now passed away, created a pedagogy of craft-making which is a legacy to her teaching and knowledge of traditional systems. This technology creates usable vessels, beautiful examples of a cultural philosophy that resonates with Aunty Rachel Mullett's framed work about traditional basket weaving. The art of weaving was prolific amongst the traditional women and for the Ngarandjerri, Aunty Pam Griffin's people of the Mouth of the Murray River, clothes and many items of daily use were everywhere.

The films sent for the exhibition have an interesting back-story in terms of cultural exchange. The people of North East Victoria and the Murray River region around Albury to Corowa, through the CMA lent the films to the communities of Gippsland with a message of seeking partnerships for the future. The videos were sent back to their home communities after the exhibition, but their impact remained behind in fostering aspirations for similar projects of cultural learning in Gippsland.

### Clans and common trails

"Gippsland clans and the Aboriginal people over the Mountains, further to this, have a commonality through song-lines and ceremony; and the Bogong Moth ceremony is part of the ceremonial cycle of both groups. The climb to Mount Bogong and the secret-sacred men's rituals were profoundly significant and time-honoured in story and art practice" (Heckenberg 2014).

The trade routes were pathways for the traditional people to come and go. We are still part of trade and cultural exchange, as demonstrated in this show. We share commonalities that reflect this disposition of travel and exchange, which accompanies trade routes. Peter Kabaila's *High Country Footprints: Aboriginal Pathways and Movement in the High Country of South Eastern Australia, Recognising the Ancient Paths Beside Modern Highways* of 2005, provides one of the best resources on this knowledge, basically because he has interviewed so many Elders with the old traditional wisdoms regarding the knowledge of the high country of southern New South Wales and north east Victoria. The Kabaila (2005) publication also shows the incredible relationships between countries through the extensive pathways Aboriginal people used. These were for ceremony (discussion with Uncle Albert Mullett 2004), trade routes and general day-to-day use.

The pathways were useful in the warm weather, but not once the weather closed in for winter (interview with informant, 2002). The importance of the pathways was also clarified in research by Bundjalung researcher Pettina Love (La Trobe University 2011), whose work revolved around the Bogong Moth life-cycles and their Aboriginal significance and she has also researched orthography of north east Victoria, tying populations together through common use of language. These facts are relevant to this study, as they explain the links between areas from the upper Murray River region and the country around Gippsland. In discussing the Bogong Moth story with Uncle Albert, we bonded over our shared stories: Gunnai and Wiradjuri shared stories through pathways and complex relationships. Complex human interaction, for example, when the Gunnai chased Wiradjuri all the way back up the Kiewa Valley and crossed the Murray to retrieve their women, who had been stolen by the Wiradjuri men (Heckenberg informant interview 2001).

This engages with the contemporary kinship ties that seemingly disparate artists have to each other. Pastor Darren Wighton exhibited his beautifully carved Emu Egg, which was carved with the Turtle. He was from Condobolin and Albury. Leanne Edwards, from East Gippsland, exhibited a linocut celebrating her relationship to the turtle. After the exhibition I discovered Pastor and Leanne were cousins. Over five hundred miles and an artscape of sharing, their individual work had come together to talk about relationship to turtle. These recurring themes established commonality over and over again. Another example, Auntie Jenny Solomon, from Morwell, presented her Yellow Daisy linocut she had produced in the Koorie Footprints project; Leonie McIntosh Wiradjuri woman from Albury presented a powerful and colourful painting of Yellow Daisy, where the daisies shimmered in yellows and oranges and reds, speaking to the audience with a metaphysical presence. For both women the Yellow Daisy had an important place in their cultural knowledge, and spiritual life; and could only just be contained on the canvas or paper, so large was the story in memory and healing knowledge.

Auntie Gloria Whalan's yabby work was experimental, using fabric and paint to create a fresh contemporary take on an age old Aboriginal story of catching Yabbies, an important and ubiquitous source of nutrition, something that continues today. Robyn Heckenberg's work of little creatures referenced the importance of the microscopic creatures in the food chain, and within the web of life. The tiny creatures, the author was informed by the Wonga Wetlands Ranger (interview 2010) need to be present in the waterways, as they are the beginning of a food chain that has as its apex, the Murray River Giant Cod. Each artwork held a story about the environment, about connection and Land. Gloria and Robyn are both Wiradjuri seeking to guide an understanding of the environment and the impacts of pollution, along with the importance of story to pedagogy of place.

Uncle Dennis's painting of the Flinders Ranges talked of his connection to his ancestral country. He was born in the bush and his mother kept the family on the move so that the government man (gubba) would not take them. His sense of belonging resonated within the painting. The audience moved inside the artwork, to be within the landscape, and the spirit of the man's sense of his country.

### Artefacts as a domain of story and knowing

The large display of artefacts resolved audience recognition of nature as a resource within cultural practices. The narrative of cultural exchange contained a thread which showed bush craft become contemporary fine art, which is an interesting transformation within Aboriginal art practice. The artisans/artists who produced the work represent that idea of work (Schumacher 1989; Kumaraparra 1957; Gardner 1989) where self-esteem, and self-knowledge are encouraged by practices that are not only culturally sustainable but also economically viable. Uncle Phil Murray, Yorta Yorta, has a small business employing ancient and modern technique to produce large shields, boomerangs, woomeras and coolamons. His work is un-ornate, since the power of the work comes from the vibration and heaviness of the river red gum he uses to craft his pieces. This is displayed in a glass cabinet, to acknowledge the preciousness of the honed wood and the Red Gums importance to the riparian landscape and its relationship to river.

Juxtapose Uncle Phil Murray's wooden cultural artefacts with other kinds of artefact, pushed in terms of technique and design to an ornate statement. The wooden piece can be read with the ornate totemic story burnt into the wooden medium. Mick Harding's artwork, for example has evolved through experimentation and reimagining form within an art historiography. The artefacts have become small sculptural forms, playing with shadow and light, documenting place and story in a vocabulary of talking within an Aboriginal way of being. He works in his own small business having created a niche market for high-end artefacts that relate just as well in a fine art gallery as a museum.

Mick Harding's work resonates for the author (Wiradjuri) back to early colonial days, where our stories intersect. The Taungurung and the Wiradjuri fought together, in a number of battles, the only one recalled by white people was the Faithful massacre, because of the white fatalities. The Wiradjuri carried the children away from the battle sites to safety; the Taungurung took on the Europeans who had become violent to the Aboriginal people of their district. To the traditional people it was a temporary victory against white invasion and of course was short lived. The Taungurung, after all were on a main route south to Melbourne. Again the story, however, demonstrates the way we are all connected to each other as Aboriginal nations, and Aboriginal clans and individuals, which is a connection into the present. Another of Mick's works, *The Reconciliation Apron*, is a collaboration between a non-indigenous artist, Kate Zizys and Taungurung artist Mick Harding and contributes the cross-cultural dynamic in an emotional story of learning from each other; with Kate's expertise as printer, and Mick as story-teller.

### The Reconciliation Narrative

The power of the Reconciliation narrative is even more profound considering Mick's peoples' contact history. This is something that is amazing within the Aboriginal narrative, especially those working in the arts, where the demands of explaining difficult histories to an often largely white audience has to be tempered by patience and restraint in an explication of past historical events. Kate explains how she developed the concept of the Apron motif as a reference to those days in the print room, where she was teacher and mentor to the Koorie Footprints to Higher Education printmaking workshops. She employed a pedagogy of empowerment to the participants where skills created a learning environment with outcomes of self-esteem, self-awareness, stronger sense of identity, and self-efficacy. An Apron motif is the form of the artwork because an Apron is always worn in the print studio: Kate saw "friendships forged as skills were shared" (interview 2016). As an ongoing narrative, many of these relationships continue in the maturity of informed art practice, such as with Kate and Mick. Mick had learnt from Kate, in turn Kate learnt from Mick. Mick's highly skilled technique has produced beautiful specialized work of significance, such as *Bunjil* for Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum (Harding 2013).

### Stories for Children

Another aspect of the *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition was the generous exposure of Indigenous publications to the show. Gloria Whalan, exhibited a series of her Wiradjuri Children's books, brimming with Aboriginal stories about place and nature. These encourage early childhood learning where Aboriginal value systems and

cultural mores are incorporated for early learning. As an Aboriginal woman who has fostered many, many abandoned children, Gloria's spark is in story telling focussing on children, whilst portraying at the same time a message for life. This is something that has been important to her in rearing children. Now she has given these skills a home in the pages of her books. Then there are the large watercolours of Lisa Kennedy, whose heritage is Tasmanian. She manifests her cultural narrative into water stories, which again she has turned into books and early learning tools. Her watercolours explain to the audience her strong connection to the coastal lore and mores of Tasmania, and explain as well, how she is part of a living thriving culture. She advises through her artwork and children's books that her people are not to be captured in the pages of history books, but that she is a colourful living artist.

## Conclusion

Australian Indigenous art retains a potent ability to be an authoritative story-teller in the public domain; and in that relationship to audience, to also be an effective teacher. Stories can be shared, and knowledge is graciously given. The entrepreneurial qualities which are reflected in the work shown at the *When All the Rivers Run* exhibition, as a model, or case study of the kind of work we pull together as Aboriginal people, demonstrates the ability that Aboriginal artists have in providing a unique pedagogy. The diverse geography of locations and origins of those in the exhibition communicated at the same time how close our kinship and story relationships are to each other. The exhibition demonstrated the ability that Indigenous Australians have to remembering kinship ties and story even though connections may be one hundred years or five hundred miles a part.

This study recognised the way that Aboriginal business practice resonates with forms of work practice that encourages spiritual wholeness, self-esteem and independence from the characteristics that western materialism has sought to contain and normalise. Through Aboriginal art-making, as typified in *When All the Rivers Run*, the ideology of Aboriginal people being sovereign to their traditional country is expressed by speaking for country and speaking for our waterways, coasts and rivers. The artists represented taught their community and the broader audience about the strength in maintaining one's culture and cultural values, through story.

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