Body of My Ancestors: Exploring Wadawurrung Dreaming
Through Visual Art

by

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submitted for the degree of **Master of Arts**

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Acknowledgements

Nyoora Wooryeen, hello how are you? I would like to acknowledge that this research, exegesis and practice were conducted on my ancestral land of the Wadawurrung/Wathaurung people. I would like to pay respects to my Elders and all other Elders, past and present and all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country, our traditional country.

I would not be here if it wasn’t for my supervisors Dr. Liza McCosh and Professor Brian Martin, to which I am thankful for allowing me to do this research on my traditional Country, which made it all the more meaningful for me. To Dr. Liza McCosh, you believed in me when no-one else did and the results have been life changing for me and my children. Not only have I extended my learning, I have extended the learning of my children, family and friends with all of my new knowledge learnt from this experience, I will take it with me forever.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Professor Estelle Barrett for her inspiration and kindness at all times and for opening the doors of possibility and actually liking my artwork.

To Mr. Peter Pilven and Dr. Dawn Whitehand, I thank you for your help and assistance in firing my clay works and ongoing practical support.

To my mum, dad, children, Blair and Max, everything I do, is with you all in mind, thank you for holding my hand and walking this path with me. My Wadawurrung symbols and knowledge are for my boys, to take and learn from.
Welcome to Country

It is important to me that I begin with a Welcome to Country, as I am a Traditional Owner of the land that encompasses Ballarat, Geelong, the southern side of the Werribee River to Port Phillip, the Bellarine Peninsula, the Otway forests and northwest to Mount Emu and Mount Misery. I will be conducting this research project on my ancestral Wadawurrung land and furthermore, a Welcome to Country, or an acknowledgement to country (if on another’s country) recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the Traditional custodians of the land, on which we stand.

Nyoora biladu-njan warr Wooryeen Narryeek Deanne
Wadawurrung ach dya-nook
Mok-borriyn Wadawurrung bugurrrk
Hello, how are you? My name is Deanne and this is Wadawurrung country. I am a Proud Wadawurrung woman.
As a Traditional Owner, I would like to welcome you to my country on behalf of my ancestors, Elders past and present and pay my respects to all other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are present here today.
Biladu-njan warr, Kimbarne Barre Wadawurrung, Welcome to Wadawurrung Country.

I would also like to acknowledge Bunjil the Creator Spirit of the Kulin Nation.
In our culture, Aboriginal people believe that Bunjil is the creator spirit. Bunjil took the form of a wedge-tailed eagle and created the Kulin land, people, animals, lore and language, which he did so from the earth at Black Hill, in Gordon. The Wadawurrung clan form part of the Kulin Nations people situated in Victoria. The other four clans that make up the Kulin nation are the Woiwurrung, Boonerwurung, Taungurung and Dja, Dja Wrung, all relating to language of the tongue.

The two totems of the Wadawurrung people are Bunjil the Eagle and Waa the Crow. Waa is said to be our ancestral totem and we refer to Waa as our ancestors.
Abstract

This research examines the collective knowledge of Wadawurrung Dreaming through visual art and aims to challenge current Western conceptions of Wadawurrung people that have been portrayed in a historical context. My work demonstrates ways in which Aboriginal women can form new connections to culture through art practices. The research has been influenced by the writings of Indigenous scholars whose work has provided context and conceptual frameworks for this thesis.

The research addresses the question of how personal symbols and ancestral artefacts can be used as an auto ethnographic tool, to engage the viewer in a real lived experience of Wadawurrung history and culture. Two further questions directed the research methods, position and approach taken within this enquiry. They include a consideration of how contemporary artworks reflect the continuation of Wadawurrung Aboriginal culture whilst remaining respectful of their original purpose and/or spiritual connection. This relates to the importance of Spirit and Country within Indigenous cultural practices, their ontological and epistemological (Dreaming) frameworks, along with relating art practice as a valid method of knowledge production within Indigenous culture.

This research is realised through a body of artwork, including painting and clay installations and contextualised by an exegesis. Important in the methodology was the gathering of collective family history, including oral transcripts and photographic images supplied by living family members, museum and library archives. My aim was to reframe ancestral and traditional Indigenous symbols used by my people prior to colonisation and by reestablishing them in contemporary artworks that will inform current and future generations of Wadawurrung descendants and inspire them to keep using and exploring ways in which we keep our culture and stories alive.

The Wadawurrung Dreaming collected within this research project raises questions on Aboriginal women’s issues of identity, discrimination and oppression and projects the reality of my ancestors lived experiences from an Indigenous perspective. The body of work provides a model for others who wish to explore and revitalise their culture and provide a means to articulate ones lived experience as a basis for valid research.
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Preface: Capturing lived experience and personal knowledge

Photograph by Shirley Richardson

I spent the first seven years of my life growing up in Sunshine, a suburb of Melbourne. Most of this time was spent being minded by my Nan (Plate 1), my Mum’s Mum, Rita Fagan. Nan was Aboriginal, having an Aboriginal mother and an Australian father. Nan’s Mum, Valentine Robinson was born on the Framlingham Aboriginal settlement near Warrnambool. It was here that she lived on the outskirts and in the bush at Purnim, with her thirteen brothers and sisters. At the age of seventeen Nan moved to Melbourne on her own and became a cook in a pub in Footscray. She lived there in a unit provided by the Catholic Church, on Ballarat Road, until she passed away, aged eighty-five. Nan had nine children, Mum being the third eldest.

I was born in 1967. I never forgot the year as a child because I was constantly being reminded how important it was in terms of the constitutional changes to the wording of the referendum in sections 51 and 127. The original wording discriminated against Aboriginal people (National Archives of Australia, 2015). I grew up thinking I was lucky to be born then, but in hindsight I now realise that I had actually grown up with a false sense of reality and under the veil of many lies. My childhood was challenging at times and I quickly learnt how things were for us as Aboriginal people. I had this uneasy feeling that I was not good enough and that people like me shouldn’t expect much out of life. I had no hopes and dreams and felt like I didn’t fit in. Although I have
come to realise this has given me the skill of fitting in to both sides of the fence, for example Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal and I accept all people from every background, race and religion.

My first lessons in art came in these early days and I knew at age four I wanted to create paintings. In fact, I refused to go to my kindergarten disco as a fairy like all the other girls, instead I wore my Dad’s builder’s overalls and carried a pot of paint with a paint brush and wore a Taubmans purple/magenta and orange hat on my head, I was making a statement and acting different to the other girls; not much has changed.

Before and after school, my Nan would hide me in the toilet when someone knocked on the front door, ‘just in case’, she would say. I never really understood what ‘just in case’ meant, but now as an adult, I do. Nan was fearful I would be taken away from her, we were very close and from that early age Nan told me stories of so much abuse she had suffered, not to scare me, but to make me strong and aware that I needed to protect myself in this lifetime and to not trust anyone. I still don’t.

It was at age four that I nearly lost my eyesight and had to have emergency surgery on my left eye after contracting meningitis. This experience has shaped my whole life path, artistic influences and personal identity. My eye problems have also influenced my other senses and made me fully aware of other ways to see that are not visual. I call it my artistic intuition and have developed an intuitive approach to my arts practice because my eyes might not always be able to see; I rely on the feeling of a painting or artwork as opposed to the aesthetic beauty of the work, it has to feel right.

Dr Finklestein was an eye specialist who opened my eyes to European and American art. I couldn’t read or write at age four and Dr Finklestein used to test my eyes on painting flash cards. It was here I discovered the helicopters of Sonia Delaunay, the rhythmical marks from Kandinsky, Monet and Renoir’s brushstrokes, Van Gogh’s sunflowers, the whimsical elements in Klee and one of my favorites, Mondrian’s fractured trees, white boxes and placement of primary splashes of colour in his
abstract works. This experience of constant testing went on for a couple years and today I still see the artworks from the flash cards in my mind and have never forgotten them. Dr Finklestein was really my first art teacher and he gave me a love and passion for art that I still reflect on. I now use many of the elements from the cards in my visual practice today. This is really important to me, as it was my first connection to my spirit and inner journey of developing my artistic identity; painting calms my mind and feeds my soul and it was my only identity for a long time and completely removed from my Aboriginal culture.

At age seven my family moved to Gordon near Ballarat, our ancestral country, and by some fated destiny, we lived next door to a clay mine. I spent all of my holidays playing in the white clay and making pots, it’s a wonder I didn’t get stuck and die in the clay as it was like quick sand, but it was my new love and a great escape from the past memories of living in Sunshine. I spent most of my childhood alone, there weren’t many girls of my age in Gordon that went to my school, except for one friend I had, but she died in a fire when I was in grade five. In those days no one had counseling, you just coped and I coped by making clay pots and drawing. By age fifteen I was in love with painting still life, I drew and painted every single pot and vase in my Mum’s house.

The many experiences that I had as a child, enabled me to articulate through the language of art how I felt, both then and now. I have a need to create a platform of visual imagery that tells the stories of not just my life but that of my family, as I have now also discovered a broader Indigenous community, that have experienced a life similar to my own. Through this journey and by connecting more deeply to my Aboriginal identity, family and culture, I am no longer alone. As an adult looking back, I can see the stories of abuse, racism, poverty, rape, addictions, loss of identity and feelings of disempowerment. These things are part of my identity and through making art about them maybe other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can discover ways of coping and sharing just like I have.
Introduction: Exploring Wadawurrung Dreaming Through Visual Art

Creating artwork within a research environment that takes into consideration, history, family stories, artefacts, symbols and practical skills, has allowed me to strengthen and develop my art practice to the point where I feel really strong and more confident as a person and a Wadawurrung woman. The artworks have enabled me to unpack the layers of meaning within a cultural framework and pay my respects to my ancestors past, present and into the future.

The notion of creating art of Dreamtime or Dreaming within the body of my artwork is something I have not been able to articulate until now. Previously I felt that Dreaming referred to the past artefacts and knowledge my ancestors had generated and yet it dawned on me through the ongoing exploration of my art, that I am actually a continuation of the Dreaming. I will endeavour to define what Dreaming means to me and the visual body of work it generates.

Dreaming itself refers to the past, present and I feel the future aspects of all Aboriginal people and culture. It encompasses spirituality and forms links with connection to land and culture that is important for my future and that of my children. Dreaming is inherent to my artwork, and places myself and my family along with the artefacts I have depicted, within a particular time and place. It is not seen but felt, and through my visual work it can be seen as a layering of history, story, object, place and spirit. It cannot be captured but is reflected upon to assist in the continuation of my culture and people. Dreaming is holistic and encompasses the whole, not just one part of my body, culture and extended Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family.

The aim of this research project is to remain respectful of my Dreaming whilst reestablishing visual marks, stories and Wadawurrung collective memory that consists of old and new knowledge. Developing a series of visual imagery through my painting and ceramics, may assist in reframing and consolidating Aboriginal
culture, and to further act as a platform for knowledge sharing through visual art. It may also assist other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader community in understanding contemporary Wadawurrung culture through visual art.

Through developing a series of contemporary artworks, I aim to show my ancestral reality as a different lived experience from that previously shown, and to further debate that connection to country and the notion of spirit through allowing Dreaming to be shown in a visual context, is a real value to be considered within Indigenous art.

My research has seen me use personal symbols alongside ancestral artefacts as an auto ethnographic tool, to engage the viewer in a real lived experience of Wadawurrung history and culture. The research extended to thinking how contemporary artworks reflect the continuation of Wadawurrung Aboriginal culture and remain respectful of their original purpose and spiritual connection. I acknowledge the importance of ‘spirit’ and ‘country’ within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art practices and methodological frameworks and my methods refer to these in creating my artworks.

I come to this research working from a woman’s perspective with a focus on artefacts, tools and images that represent Wadawurrung women, past and present, and in doing so, I lay foundation material for future artistic explorations. I draw upon other Wadawurrung women as my support networks and consider auto ethnographic research practices that take in and reflect the above influences and perceptions.

To give an example of what constitutes material for me to work from, I would like to convey a story told to me by my Mum and how this plays a part in validating my reality and the importance of acknowledging lived experience within the body of my artwork. My Mum’s account therefore has become a valid story to pass down to my children. This is her belief, lived experience and Dreaming. When my
family moved from Melbourne to Gordon over forty years ago, Mum and Dad decided to build their own home. During the process of digging out the new house foundations, a small cluster of artefacts were found, directly where the back door was to be. They consisted of a grinding stone and two perfectly formed axe heads. It was then that my Mum felt that this was her first Welcome to Country acknowledgement, in the form of the stone tools. Mum always said that they were waiting for her return and a gift from the ancestors. There were also over fifty crows that landed on our fence when we first drove in to the property, again another reference to our ancestors and a sign that one of our totems, Waa the Crow, was waiting for us (Gilson M. 2014).

These seemingly insignificant events are important to my understanding and spiritual connection to my ancestor’s knowledge and connection to Country as I perceive my own reality. My intellectual and visual knowledge is constantly in the process of being developed through accessing oral family histories from members of my immediate family, museum archives, libraries and by living on Country and connecting to culture through other Indigenous people I come into contact with on my life journey. The stories no matter how brief, contribute to our culture and history.

At the beginning of this research project I came across an ancestral photograph of Queen Mary (Plate 2) that inspired this research enquiry, in particular the artefacts that adorn her body. These artefacts have relevance for me in building a visual diary that supports my contemporary painting and ceramic practice. They are used as a visual trigger in developing new contemporary symbols. I have developed these symbols with the knowledge that they still need to connect to the traditional ones in order to maintain cultural connections to the past. For me the photograph also recalls the conditions and social issues Mary would have experienced through colonial practices and I draw upon this in my research and in creating the body of artwork.

I first found the image of Mary in The Ballarat Gold Museum archive along with other photographs and references to Wadawurrung people, my people. The photograph depicts Mary in an almost unnatural pose, wearing a Victorian constructed full-length skirt and a roughly made shirt, which appears to be made from jute, hessian or some kind of calico.

Mary is adorned with what I refer to as ‘traditional artefacts’. The traditional artefacts stem from before colonisation and would have originally been intended for the use in everyday activities, like killing animals for food and clothing, preparing and gathering food.

Baskets, spears, shields and a boomerang are all objects Mary would have originally made herself, although the artefacts in the photograph where more likely to be props, as it does not state they were of her own making. I have used the artefacts, people, stories and reference to country as beginning points to inspire the making of visual imagery that will come under an umbrella term of ‘Wadawurrung Dreaming’.
It was common practice for nineteenth-century photographers to use objects similar to that in the picture of Mary as a way to manipulate the general public into thinking that local Aboriginal people had become more civilised and to their liking, particularly after Aboriginal people were placed in Missions like Coranderrk. The photos created a false picture of wellbeing, with the Government credited as being responsible for this. Such photographs created a false sense of reality that I explore in this exegesis through visual documentation; my perspective is that of being a relative of Mary and aligning myself with what she may have felt as opposed to what the Missions portrayed. My perspective is Wadawurrung.

In conjunction, Mary was labeled a full blooded Aboriginal woman by the Government and I suggest the photograph was deliberately devised to depict the so called full-bloods as being more native or wilder than what they coined the half-caste Aboriginals (meaning of mixed races). I have used the terms ‘full-blood’ and ‘half-caste’ as cited in the Ballarat Gold Museum’s documentation and do not normally use these words myself in describing my Aboriginal family. I view my immediate family on my Mum’s side as being Aboriginal and do not measure it by percentages; I feel this is not a normal way of talking for us, but a Western construct and way of thinking. The Ballarat Gold Museum archives talk about this percentage construct as a way to segregate the Aboriginal person from family in order to assimilate them into white society (Ballarat Gold Museum archive 2014).

I can relate this segregation to my immediate family experience and how I have experienced the generational consequences of this behavior. My Nan, Rita, was considered a half-caste and was forced to live on the outskirts of the Framlingham Mission in the bush with her thirteen brothers and sisters, even though their mother was born in Framlingham as an Aboriginal woman. These connections have played a part in forming my own political and social views, as this history impacted heavily on my family and in turn has now influenced the content of my visual artwork. I use this way of documenting my culture to strengthen my family connections, draw links with the past, relate family stories taking place in the
present and assist in preparing a strong platform for my children to view their culture in the future in a realistic and proactive way.

In the photo of Mary, she is standing in front of a white picket fence. The white picket fence and white house has long been a metaphor for many Westerners as having an endearing quality, with the romantic notion of a happy home. For Mary the white picket fence could be seen as a wall to keep Mary in and separate Mary from culture, family and traditional ways of living. I will talk further about the visual impact the fence has had on my artwork later in the methodology chapter and at this point would like to acknowledge Mary and thank her for the inspiration to go ahead with researching this project and for giving me the first visual tools in which to begin my artefact documentation.

For the purpose of understanding my relationship to Mary I have included a brief family history connecting me to my Wadawurrung family. This is important to acknowledge in this paper as it places me in the mindset of understanding where I come from, why I feel and act the way I do, and how I relate this to my visual arts practice.

Wadawurrung people have been around for more than 25,000 years and were made up of twenty-five individual clans, in which the language was spoken. It is said that sixty to one hundred and twenty individuals made up each clan group (Gilson M. 2014).

Wadawurrung Country encompasses Ballarat, Geelong, the southern side of the Werribee River to Port Phillip, the Bellarine Peninsula, the Otway forests and northwest to Mount Emu and Mount Misery. In the late 1800’s it was said that only three Wadawurrung remained, one being my great, great grandfather John Robinson. After being removed from country in Skipton, near Ballarat, he lived on the outskirts of the Gunditjmara tribe. Later marrying Margaret Anne Mathews, they had seven children and one of them was my great grandmother Valentine Margaret Robinson, who was born on the Framlingham Aboriginal mission (Gilson,
M. 2014). John Robinson was the son of William and Mary, known as King Billy and Queen Mary. They roamed the Ballarat, Warrenheip, Lal Lal, Mount Buninyong, Bacchus Marsh and Ballan surrounding areas, during the early to mid-1800’s. King Billy died at Ballan in 1860 and is buried on Country in the pioneer cemetery, Old Geelong Road, Ballan (Gilson, T. 2014).

The following chapter will outline literature that supported the methodology and methods used to create the artworks. The literature acts as a platform assisting to visualise through the written and spoken words my Wadawurrung Dreaming.
Literature Review: *Positioning Waa in a broader context*

Plate 3: Deanne Gilson, *Positioning Waa in a Broader Context*. 2014, Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, gold leaf, acrylic on linen, 20 x 30 cm

In *Positioning Waa in a Broader Context* (Plate 3) I have depicted the feather of my totem Waa the Crow over the Australian flag. This artwork was painted in an attempt to position myself within the literature. By deliberately using the crow feather as a metaphor for the ancestral body and placing it over the top of the Australian flag, I position my ancestors as being here first, before the flag and the politics that came with it. This strengthens my position and creates a different reality for the flag that allows the viewer to consider the other original inhabitants existing in this country before colonisation.

In this chapter I discuss literature that has helped inform my social and political views and hence my visual imagery. I am working from an Aboriginal perspective but need to also acknowledge my father’s side and the shared views coming from
having an Aboriginal mother and a non-Aboriginal father. Furthermore my father’s parents were of English descent and this needs to be taken into account, as the mixed identity has posed many challenges and created a confusing identity for me at times, including throughout developing my body of creative work. My loyalty and moral values lie more so with my mother’s side of the family because of the close connection to my Aboriginal grandmother and the understandings we shared. I have always considered my Aboriginal Nan my mother in this lifetime and this is a common way of thinking for Aboriginal people who view their family in a somewhat different relational structure than Western families. For example, some of my Aboriginal friends refer to their grandchildren as their grannies, meaning they are their grandparents who have come back through the children in this lifetime. The artwork for this exegesis takes in both Aboriginal and European influences as they both contribute to my lived experience. I have sought out artists, theorists and philosophers that have at some point in their careers developed a sense of the spirit and have shown to portray the truth in a way that is not always visible to the eye but includes an underlying reality that I feel has sometimes been overlooked in a historical context. As I have now discovered my writing and art go hand in hand to form my Dreaming. This document contributes to Wadawurrung Dreaming and extends my ancestral knowledge in the form of oral stories, visual imagery and collective family memory.

In her paper *Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy The basis of Aboriginal Social and Emotional Well Being*, Vicki Grieves talks about the importance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to continue to hold on to their spirituality as it is linked to their social and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore spirituality is connected to the practices, ceremonies, knowledge of the past and the understanding of the totem figure living in multiple worlds that move from spirit to the living. Grieves states that this is fundamental to the ontologies (understandings of what it means to be) and epistemologies (as ways of knowing) that take into account the colonised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person living today and the influence of the Western ontology and how this impacts on
the spiritual aspect of our lives (Grieves, 2009. 2). This is not a reality for a Western ontology but a reality for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander way of thinking. This reality moves through my art and will be discussed further in the methodology chapter.

Early childhood influences have added to some extent a visual representation of Western aesthetics within my work but this is not meant to portray a mindset that is in line with Western philosophy, political and social views. While this influence is present, my work is more fully grounded in an Aboriginal aesthetic relational to culture. To clarify this, I need to look at the first question put forward in the introduction. Can my personal symbols and ancestral artefacts be used as an auto ethnographic tool, to engage the viewer in a real lived experience of Wadawurrung history and culture? The answer for me lies somewhere within the two parts to this question. Firstly, the traditional artefacts and symbols themselves, such as the wave and diamond patterns found on pre-colonial Wadawurrung shields, greenstone axe heads, grinding stones, baskets, boomerangs, possum skin cloaks, shields, clubs and coolamons, have not come from Western culture, philosophy or by Western makers. They stem from thousands of years of knowledge of making and creating by my ancestors, who had no contact with Western society. Therefore the artefacts contain their own knowledge systems separate to Western cultures. They are a visual account of how my ancestors were living only up until colonisation but do not reflect the reality of post-colonisation.

Secondly, the contemporary artefacts and symbols, like the feathers, circle, breastplate, Queen Mary and King Billy Crown, Bunjil and Waa totems represented in the paintings and clay works, that I have created for this research are based on drawing upon early visual ancestral knowledge, marks, stone tool, baskets, artefacts, stories and memory to reflect the notion of the continuation of my lived experience that links back to the past and projects to the future continuation of my Aboriginal culture. I am in a position of being responsible to portray through my art the reality of now as I see it, a reality that takes in the
early post-colonial accounts of family being removed from Country and recounting the many issues they suffered as a result. This also gives connection to Country more validation and importance, which I have explored within my art.

Professor Lester Irabinna Rigney talks about how Indigenous people think and interpret the world and its realities in differing ways to non-Indigenous peoples because of their experiences, histories, cultures and values and this needs to be taken into account and accepted by non-Indigenous people as the right way for people like myself to engage in education (Rigney 1997: 634). Rigney further states that Indigenous peoples’ interests, knowledge and experiences must be at the centre of research methodologies and construction of knowledge about Indigenous people (Rigney 1999: 119). With the research focusing on and taking into account the lived, historical experiences, ideas, traditions, dreams, interests, aspirations and struggles of the Indigenous Australian (Rigney 1997: 639).

Rigney, further discusses the importance of Dreaming itself with the following statement that I feel sums up what Dreaming means for me:

Dreaming is a term that refers to all that is known and all that is understood by Aboriginal people regarding spiritual and socio-economic interdependence with the land. Historically it is central to the existence of Aboriginal people and lifestyle and culture, for it determines and reinforces our identity, values and beliefs and our inter-relationships with every living creature and features of the land. (Rigney, 1994: 171)

Dreaming is not just about the spiritual, it is strongly connected to Country and some would say that Country is spiritual. I see Dreaming as related to all things in my personal life journey, including my art. Professor Howard Morphy also acknowledges Dreaming, albeit from an outsiders’ point of view:

The whole of creation, all of human life, is mapped on the landscape, to which ancestral beings are inextricably connected. Almost anything that
exists has its place in the Dreamtime, whether it is an animal such as a kangaroo or emu; an object such as a spear thrower, a stone spear head or a ceremonial head dress; a ritual practice such as circumcision; or even an illness such as a cough or smallpox. And everything that has a place in the Dreamtime is likely to have a place associated with it on earth: a hill that is the transformed body of a kangaroo, stones coughed out of the body of the ancestral being and so on. (Morphy 2010: 108)

The Dreaming gives everything equal importance and a sense of purpose and place, this in turn begins to build what I think constitutes a different type of paradigm, that needs to be taken in to account in academia. Aboriginal scholars and perspectives need to be acknowledged alongside western academic ways, when educating and assessing students like myself. Many aspects of Dreaming deal with the unseen or unknown, to my immediate Aboriginal family this is widely accepted and is how I was brought up. These hidden elements are important for me to translate and build into my work as an artist. They seem to sit outside the normal way of doing things in the academic field, and I feel this perspective needs to change. Aboriginal perspectives need to be recognised as truth and reality and should be viewed not as a new truth, knowledge and truth.

Contemporary Aboriginal artist Julie Gough talks about a break that occurred in her own family generations due to colonisation and being removed off Country. Her method to reconnect back through visual art came firstly by accessing museum archives and by working through them, Gough felt ready to return to Country and begin the process of using what she defines as ‘carrying culture’. Gough began the process by sourcing local materials consisting of mud, grasses, Iomandra, cuttlefish and branches and by gathering rocks, thus referencing the natural materials her ancestors would have used. This enabled Gough to reconnect and define through art a way to carry culture through to the next generation (Gough, 2007). I have found Gough’s approach helpful, as it implies a way for myself to carry Wadawurrung culture through my own art making exploration.
Past and present Aboriginal artists that have had a direct influence on my visual arts practice and have helped frame a way forward to create new works include, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Judy Watson and Gordon Bennett. I have also found practices from European and Western artists such as, Van Gogh, Klee, Mondrian and Kandinsky to also hold some significance within my arts practice, but more so as an aesthetic tool. I find some of their early theories interesting and can see how they have influenced the development of my creative practice.

Modernist artist Paul Klee’s ideas on connecting to the spiritual or unseen forces that take the invisible elements and make them visible, for me, draws a parallel with Aboriginal knowledge systems that I strive to work within. The unseen forces that I work within are notions of Dreaming, spiritual influences that are also tied in with emotional experiences, that are not visible to the eye but based on oral storytelling and personal beliefs passed down by my mother. Klee talks about this notion further in his writings and his early influence enhances my own Aboriginal notions of working with this framework. In speaking of these unseen forces Klee stated:

“They must have common roots in the earth below and must meet in the cosmos above. The unity of this structure is composed of ego and object, cosmic and earthly elements. Each separate element of this structure is only a fragment. Now the real nature of visible things is revealed and so becomes reality. What is visible is a fragment of the whole universe.” In a shorter version of Klee on the visible, he states that “Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible.”  (Klee in Haftmann nd: 84-86)

Throughout his lifetime, Klee developed many theories and principles that he used when making art. The above quote is reminiscent of Klee’s teachings, creating a parallel art world, in which one could move between the living and the spirit world, accepting them both as a visual reality from which to create. Klee
took his theoretical approaches from several areas consisting of religion, philosophy and his own thoughts. Klee talks about the notion of duality and also ‘oneness’ as we are all fragments of one another. I can relate the notion of oneness from the theories of Klee and feel the above quote holds many interesting parallels to the element of the spiritual that I am seeking to explore within my work. For me Aboriginal spirituality is holistic, is connected to country and forms part of my whole reality.

Plate 4: Paul Klee, *Secret Type Face*, 1934. Oil on canvas (Lazzaro 1957:20)

In 1934 Klee produced a series of works that further developed his visual language. In *Secret Type Face*, (Plate 4), he used his own symbols for the first time, the marks forming their own compositional structure.

In The Wadawurrung Cultural Tree of knowledge (Plate 5) I took this basic concept from Klee and developed my own artwork using traditional and contemporary symbols.
Plate 5: Deanne Gilson, *Wadawurrung Cultural Tree of Knowledge*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150 cm

My painted tree shows the symbology of my culture through depicting particular Wadawurrung artefacts like the greenstone axe head, which I use regularly in my work along with the traditional patterns found on artefacts. These symbols were placed within a circle that references the yarning circle and sharing of knowledge. I am in turn sharing my symbols with the viewer. I will talk further about this early artwork in the methodology chapter.

Russian artist and theorist Wassily Kandinsky also created abstract artwork depicting the inner beauty and spiritual self. The element of the spiritual within artwork is something I aim to explore. Kandinsky’s poetic, rhythmical paintings consisted of using colour in its purest of form and his limited colour usage draws parallels to my own use of limited colour. Kandinsky followed a strict colour palette, which was used in Religious Iconography previously, whereas my own palette is concerned with the colours of Country (Kandinsky in Lindsay and Vergo 1994: 187).
Further influences that assisted in my *Wadawurrung Cultural Tree of Knowledge* painting also stemmed from my childhood influences of being shown the painting flash cards and included the artwork of Piet Mondrian. Mondrian created many tree studies, see *Gray Tree* (Plate 6) and by 1912 he had abandoned the usual depiction of reality and space, to express ideas in a way that broke up the canvas to depict opposites and play with subconscious balance within form.

![Plate 6: Piet Mondrian, Gray Tree, 1912. Oil on canvas, 78.5 x 107.5 cm (accessed February 2, 2014)](image)

Mondrian created an optical alteration of form to the point where the whole canvas encompassed a way to create marks that link as a whole. This style signified oneness to Mondrian, who sought to create wholeness within the one frame (Mondrian 1987: 40). I relate this to Dreaming ontology where all my cultural knowledge, stories, memories, artefacts and visual images are contained in that knowledge. This also relates to Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s (Plate 12) way of painting stories that work within an Aboriginal system separate to Western art practices. I will talk further about this in the methodology chapter.
In building the importance of Aboriginal perspectives, I feel a connection to Artist Leah King-Smith, who also has an Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father. King-Smith has used images from nineteenth century photographs, similar to the one of Mary and overlays ghost like images of Aboriginal people to portray another reality separate from the one originally intended. Smith takes the harshness away and restores the power to the people by connecting them to country and by depicting them as spiritual beings that transcend their detached environment from where they were originally taken.

King-Smith is quoted as saying,

My aim in re-photographing these people was to shift the emphasis away from their outer world condition, since that is determined by the dominant culture, to engage the viewer’s attention inwardly and to see Indigenous people in a positive and spiritual light (King-Smith, 2006: 56).

I have found King-Smith assists my questioning into relating my people back to country within a visual arts context. I can relate to the people in King-Smith’s images on a personal, emotional and spiritual level, because Queen Mary (Plate 2) was initially photographed in a way that did not represent her true reality. This photograph was one of a series taken by Fred Kruger and it has inspired an artwork titled, Bloody Mary, which will be discussed further in the methodology chapter.

Fred Kruger was a German migrant who after falling on hard times when he moved to Australia became a photographer. During the period of the 1870s to the mid 1880s Kruger visited Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri Country, taking in Ballarat, Barwon Heads, the You Yangs, Creswick, Bendigo, Healesville and Coranderrk. It is here that Kruger was commissioned by the homeowners to photograph the properties of the new pastoralists. The Board of Protection for the Aborigines commissioned Kruger to photograph the Aboriginal people of Coranderrk and Framlingham during this time. It was here that he photographed my Aboriginal ancestors including Mary. These photographs made me think of a different reality I felt that I needed to address within my artwork. An important
factor within the photographs was the depiction of white picket fences as seen in (Plate 7) (Kruger 2012: 10, 46).

![Plate 7: Fred Kruger, A View of the You Yangs, c. 1882, Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (accessed March 14, 2014)

The image of a white picket fence running through my Country is a chilling thought, as it infers colonial boundaries, segregation and the ultimate almost demise of my people. I reference the white picket fence in the ceramic installation *Warrongawan Veil* (Plate 20), which is further discussed in the methodology chapter.

I have looked at the way in which King-Smith took the nineteenth century photographs and reframed them and have made another connection with the work of Dr. Kathleen Butler that I feel strongly relates to King-Smith’s reframing through an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander lens. Butler is an Aboriginal woman of the Bundjalung and Worimi people of Coastal New South Wales. In her article, ‘Into the Photo Box: An alternative way of approaching the Aboriginal family, she suggests that Aboriginal families have been deemed to be in need of change and transformation under the ‘gaze’ of state political presence. She reveals the flawed perceptions of Aboriginal motherhood and that the actual reality of the
lived experience of Aboriginal experiences is ignored. Within the article I found the mention of the Aboriginal family as in need of becoming an image of white civility since 1788 and the presence of the Christian missionaries who also sought to save the souls of the Aboriginal person as a degrading construct. (Butler 2013: 35 - 44).

Butler’s article had a profound impact on me and influenced how I present my work. Her writing helped me not only find my voice but form a new vision in the way in which I portray my ancestors in a visual context. This shift involved moving from what I feel is literally being put in to a box labeled the angry Aboriginal woman, to strengthening my position and presenting my reality from within my family’s lived experience, perspective and truth. After reading Butler’s writing I created a conceptual artwork to frame my ideas. This piece is shown in the appendix and titled: White Haze, Black Gaze (Plate 43).

Artist Gordon Bennett has been influential. Through his artwork he interrogates racism, identity, political, social and cultural views through a focus on binary opposites. He uses opposing words rather than single words such as good/bad, light/dark, masculine/feminine, old/young, and rich/poor. He used these words in a social and political context in his art. I was drawn to Bennett’s work because he reflects upon growing up disconnected from realising he was Aboriginal and for the way he explores different Western, European and Indigenous artistic influences. Similar layers exist within my artwork, not through the use of text itself, but through other aesthetic means. I feel the issues Bennett depicts through the layering of Aboriginal references and Western European influences, along with the layering of historical issues has inspired the content and compositions of my artwork. Bennett states in the following quote:

I decided that I was in a very interesting position. My mind and body had been effectively colonised by Western culture, and yet my Aboriginality, which had been historically, socially, and personally repressed, was still part of me and I was obtaining tools and language to explore it on my own
terms. In a conceptual sense I was liberated from the binary prison of self and other, the wall had disintegrated but where was I? In a real sense I was still living in the suburbs, and in a world where there were real demands to be one thing or another. There was still no place for me to simply be. I decided that I would attempt to create a space by adopting a strategy of intervention and disturbance in the field of representation through my art. (Gordon Bennett, The National Gallery Education Resource (http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/gordonbennett/education/02.html accessed March 3, 2014)

Plate 8: Gordon Bennett, *But I always wanted to be one of the good guys*, 1990. Oil on canvas, 150 x 260 cm (accessed March 3, 2014)

*But I always wanted to be one of the good guys* (Plate 8) Bennett’s self-portrait looks at the racist language found in old history books, challenging the stereotype of the Aboriginal man portrayed as a savage beast needing salvation either by killing or assimilating into Western society. The powerful words ‘I Am’ questions these images and gives power and strength in Bennett’s own positioning.
The racist language Bennett refers to, I also found disturbing when I visited the Ballarat Gold Museum archives such as terms like ‘Wadawurrung Blacks at Play’ seen on postcards from the early 1920’s. I found myself questioning earlier historical ethical standards of the Western mindsets, in light of putting my people down. The postcard reference was evidence to me that I did not imagine this feeling of being considered less than others as it was here in black and white and celebrated as a tourist postcard. These disturbing elements of racism towards my own Aboriginal family and understanding the layering of Bennett’s artwork, have enabled me to reestablish my own social, historical and political views and reposition this knowledge into my artwork to reveal the true Wadawurrung person and not the constructed one from the postcards of the past. I am then able to bring a fresh reality to my work and respect the stories and memories from the past. Like Bennett, I am creating my own visual language through art. In referencing Bennett’s title with the use of the text I Am, I painted an artwork early in my Masters enquiry titled I Am Ballarat Gold (Plate 15). This work is discussed in the following chapter and it is important for me to say that it was produced before I was aware of Bennett’s work, as I feel the linking of similar issues is important to acknowledge here.

This research project would not be complete without referencing the importance of yarning within an Aboriginal framework and by including it as a valid experience within a Western notion of academic research. Dawn Bessarab and Bridget Ng’andu have included yarning as a valid research tool to work within, whilst doing qualitative research. Yarning simply means having a conversation and is done in a semi-structured interview and can take place in many different forms like talking through oral stories, writing, email and letters. A group of my friends who are weavers get together regularly to yarn/talk, exchange information about their weaving practice and teach each other new techniques. This sharing of knowledge is important for Aboriginal communities to keep culture alive and to develop new ideas and ways of doing things. Another important event in which I participate in yarning and which aids in enriching my culture, is an annual cultural
event that I participate in with my children, extended family and the five Clans that make up the Kulin Nation in Victoria. The event is called Tanderrum, meaning to perform ceremony and yarning. Here we exchange cultural information about, dance, song, language, ceremony, music, artefacts, painting, Country, totems and everything else we feel is relevant to our wellbeing. There are months of workshops that we undertake leading up to the event and final performance. This type of yarning is not just a form of social yarning but overlaps with the research conversation as important ideas, skills and knowledge are being shared. Informative yarning practices can take place one on one and still have impact in research environments, it’s up to the researcher to articulate the social and the knowledge component (Bessarab, Ng’andu, 2010, 8).

Several other theorists and artists have influenced the way in which my methodology has been conducted. People such as Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Shawn Wilson, Veronica Arbon, Brian Martin and Karen Martin, all come from and work within an Indigenous knowledge system that has assisted in framing my methodology, concepts and creative output in this research project. Their input will be discussed in the following chapter.
**Methodology: Creating work within an Indigenous framework of thinking**

In this chapter I explore how studio practice can assist the enquiry into my original questions, and form a platform for Indigenous theories to be recognised as valid tools of research. By gathering and incorporating Indigenous methodological approaches into my research I hope to further enhance the relevance of contemporary Aboriginal art. In support of this I found these words by artist Annette Iggunlen in her PhD thesis comforting and inspirational. Annette states, “Visual language brings a different perspective to that offered by scholars whose primary tool is written language”. Iggunlen further states that “material practice might challenge and advance theory”. (Iggulden in Barrett and Bolt, 2007: 65, 66).

My methodological approach included gathering collective family memories, information from museum archives, family photographs and oral stories, all having enormous value in building the body of creative artwork. In this process I have also acknowledged childhood events that assisted in my early creative vision and assisted in building my methodological frameworks.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (2012), Linda Tuhiwai Smith talks about ways in which Indigenous people can decolonise the imperial methods embedded in current research minds and institutions and how this can contribute to the ways in which Indigenous people can reclaim ways of being and knowing, through research practices (Smith 2012: 20). The colonised viewpoint of Western research practices where archaeologists, anthropologists, genealogists and other researchers who are non-Indigenous have portrayed Indigenous stories, histories and traditions from their perspective, has shaped Indigenous histories in a way that does not always portray the truth from an Indigenous viewpoint (Smith 2012: 35). This validates my views on Wadawurrung Dreaming as discussed throughout this paper.
Smith has been involved with twenty-five projects that work in a ‘way’ to begin the dialogue on what is important for Indigenous research to be considered a valid tool. Smith refers to actual methods and not methodology, as the means in which research could be more informative and connective of the wider Indigenous community. The projects Smith has been involved in have helped me articulate a starting point in my methodology and in developing my artworks, this knowledge becoming a tool for future generations. The projects Smith worked on consist of the following:

**Claiming**: establishing the history of claims and gathering collective history, reframing history and by doing so revealing new truths that are then formally documented.

In relation to this I am claiming my own history and looking for truths and reality relevant to my family and I. An example can be seen in the ceramic installation *Warrongawon Veil* (Plate 19) which relays my Nan’s story of being abused under the veil of the secrecy that existed in her life and by doing this I claim back my Nan’s strength, which also makes me feel stronger. In making my work I drew on Bennett’s method of telling his family stories through his art and how he confronted the issues that affected his life.

**Testimonies**: Gaining oral evidence and forming a collective voice through this process.

**Storytelling**: Telling stories, is a crucial part of remembering oral family history, including Dreaming stories, along with the gathering of new family histories and stories to include alongside older ones, thus creating new knowledge. My strongest influence has been the stories told to me by my Mum, Marlene Gilson. She has taught me our Creation Story as handed down to her over thirty years ago, by an Elder. I have depicted *Bunjil the Creator Spirit*, in (Plate 9) to depict my Mum’s version of the story. This is important because there are several different Bunjil stories and our Wadawurrung version varies slightly from the others.
Plate 9: Deanne Gilson, *Bunjil the Creator Spirit*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, acrylic on linen, 90 x 100 cm. In this painting I have depicted Bunjil the Eagle one of my totems in order to acknowledge how important Bunjil is to the relationship between ancestral spirit, totem, connection to country and myself.

*Creating:* Creating not only involves creating art, it includes creating communities that are aware and connected through the creative process of sharing stories, art and traditional cultural practices. For me, creating is my most powerful way to share, perform culture, inform, celebrate, internalise emotions, begin new stories and tell old ones; the artworks are my voice. I have worked within a similar methodology to Smith because the connection to claiming, storytelling and creating are what make up my practice, and one or all may be used at different times to tell the story I wish to convey.

The further twenty-five projects outlined by Smith include: celebrating survival, remembering, indigenizing and indigenist processes, intervening, revitalizing and
regenerating, connecting, reading, writing theory and making, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing and indigenist governance, networking, naming, protecting, negotiating, discovering the beauty of our knowledge, and sharing (Smith 2012: 144).

Canadian scholar Shawn Wilson, an Opaskwayak Cree man from Northern Manitoba, writes about yarning circles, in his book Research is Ceremony, Indigenous Research Methods (2008). He quotes from Terry Tafoya, who says yarning circles are stories that go in circles, they don’t go in straight lines, there are stories inside and in between stories (Tafoya in Wilson 2008: 6). The yarning circle is a way in which Indigenous people tell stories. In relation to the statement made by Tafoya, I have explored the symbol of the circle and its relationship to culture through a number of paintings and installation works. These artworks are demonstrated in (Plates 20, 28, 30 and 32) and are discussed further in this chapter.

The circle has been explored by other scholars as an important symbol within Indigenous semiotics. In her book Ancestral Power (2002), Dr. Lynne Hume interviewed several Elders from the Kimberley and asks them what the circle symbol means in their paintings. The circle had many meanings, for example: a waterhole, connection to the land, a sacred site, a campsite, a fire, a circular path. Circles are energy lines they have no beginning and no ending, they are portals to the spirit world and can have power in rituals. The circle can represent the woman, birth, pregnancy and the womb that carries the child to and from spirit. Time and different dimensions are also reflected upon through the circle (Hume 2002: 79-81). On this journey I have come to see the circle as the womb, my Nan, my mother, my sisters, my portal to the spirit mother and mother earth. I have used this symbol throughout my artwork to ground myself to my family and to connect to other women around me.

Returning to Wilson’s view of a circle and how this knowledge can assist me to work within an Aboriginal framework. He suggests this framework can have four
parts: **Ontology**, concerned with the nature of being and relations to each other, this ties in with the stories of Dreaming and connections between country, artefacts, stories and people. **Epistemology**, relating to the theory of knowledge and its methods, validity and the scope of things in a broader context. This is important within my visual art and the writing of this document. I found when I created, *Warrongawon Veil* (Plate 19) that it had a universal scope, much bigger than the initial idea I intended. I received feedback after exhibiting the piece and found it impacted on many other races and religions.

The third part of Wilson’s framework is **Axiology**, concerning a branch of philosophy that deals with the value study of ethics, religions and aesthetics, it assigns meaning and ascertains the value in reality. For example, studying the ethics of Christians is a study of axiology. This can be used in relation to researching my own culture and encompassing its spiritual beliefs, held within the Dreaming. The fourth is **methodology**, methods, principles and rules that apply to different fields, in my case visual art. Wilson states that the elements should not be separate but flow in to each other, they continue in a circular path. This infers a relational experience between the phases of research (Wilson 2008: 70).

Wilson’s elements have helped me to frame my research relating it more to the things that bond and connect myself to family and cultural knowledge. Wilson implies that many Indigenous people have a healthy sense of spirituality, that it is just as important as mental, emotional and physical wellbeing, and that this is connected to country and to each other (Wilson 2008: 89). These ideas act as a scaffold in forming my own Aboriginal ideology that becomes conscious and unconscious in the way I do things. For example, I will not take ochre off another’s country. The reason being is that it is not mine to take and I have no way of knowing if it is a sacred ceremonial site or whether the ochre was used by men only. I feel there are many reasons why I do this and they run deeper than the conscious mind. In an artist talk by Gunditjmara Elder Gavin Couzens (2012), I learnt about red ochre being used in men’s ceremonies. It is for this reason alone that I do not use red ochre in my art, unless it is related to men. If ochre that is not red in colour, is given to me to use by another on another’s Country I will then
feel it is right to use it. The same goes for accessing artefacts, stories and totems that are not from my Country and do not have links to my family and ancestors. I have personally experienced quite recently that amongst my artistic friends it is becoming more widespread within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art communities to take imagery and totems from other clans to use in their artwork rather than using their own. I do not agree with this as it does not support one’s own Dreaming in a visual sense, and has no purpose but to produce art that is not connected to one’s self and particular culture. This way of doing things is not my way. Although I do acknowledge that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are disconnected and searching for links to culture through art. There needs to be more conversations within the Aboriginal community surrounding the handing over of artistic, cultural and intellectual knowledge to be used in a way that respects all. I have no connection or purpose in using knowledge that is not generated by my own family connections. I have been taught this way of doing things by my Mum, I maintain my family connection and being able to relate to my artwork as Wadawurrung Dreaming. I relate this to my earlier questioning about portraying the truth and reality from a Wadawurrung perspective, for me it can only be captured when all of the above are in place, the past, present and future must be reflected as my truth. This can be further understood in this quote by Wilson:

That’s the spiritual part of it. If you talk about research as a ceremony, that’s the climax of the ceremony, when it all comes together and all those connections are made. Cause that’s what ceremony is about, is strengthening those connections. (Wilson 2008: 89).

Wilson has shown me that ceremony is all things I do in connection and relation to my family, community and broader community and culture. These connections form our Dreaming and I need to be accountable for what I put forward in my own ceremony. Learning in Indigenous society is ceremonial and can have many different layers. An Elder from Wilson’s family talks about the three phases of storytelling that are all part of the ceremony and connected to each other, even when told by many people and from different viewpoints. They include sacred
stories, Dreaming and oral stories that relate personal experience or experiences of others. By transferring the knowledge through the story we become stronger and connect with each other (Wilson 2008: 98).

I suggest stories passed down by Wadawurrung ancestors such as the Bunjil Creation Story, where a totem animal takes on powerful meaning, need to be represented alongside the stories, for example that my Mum has told me. The stories connect to each other and are underpinned by the beliefs of generations of our ancestors. Bunjil Creation Story is sacred to us as it talks about our creation, it states that Bunjil the Wedge-tailed Eagle made the first man and woman from clay. This story is relevant to my clay works and art making process, like the baskets containing the knowledge, they become figurative and reflect the human condition within the stories of my family. The medium of clay itself is important as it is usually from Country and that connects me back to Country, the process goes in circles like the stories. If clay does not form properly or breaks, even after firing, it can be broken down and reused into new works and during this process the clay becomes stronger. I see this as a metaphor for the body and it reminds me of losing my friend as a child; the clay helped me to heal in a way that shaped my life to a certain extent. My clay story then adds to my Dreaming stories and my Mum’s stories.

Professor Veronica Arbon an Arabana woman, talks about understanding the Indigenous Knowledge position. Arbon states, “my position is that we all as Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islander people have our own knowledge position” (http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/stories/2009/05/18/understanding-the-indigenous-knowledge-position accessed November 7, 2014). Arbon turned to Ularaka, the Arabana worldview, to consider methodology and method drawing from ancient knowledge. She states to experience and engage from the Arabana position means to engage all of one’s senses simultaneously. The word Ularaka has several meanings: cosmos, cosmology,
worldview, knowledge, history, philosophy, ‘all that is Arabana’, Dreaming Arabana refers to the ontological knowledge.

Coming from this position Arbon uses a metaphor to help understand the metaphorical meaning in the Arabana world:

I draw on the Yalka. The Yalka is a wild onion which is important for both food and metaphorical meaning in the Arabana world. The Yalka represents what it is to be, know and do as an Arabana entity-a person or the Ularaka, for example. The Yalka is represented in one form. (Arbon 2008: 142-145)

Arbon uses a circle diagram of dots that list three words around the circle, (I view this as a form of yarning circle) they are *know*: exists, located, presence, experience, organized, controlled. *Do*: dialogue, mentorship, responsibility, interpretation and understanding. *Be*: essence, identity, consciousness, embodiment, reciprocity, relatedness. She states that the onion metaphor is the essence of the force of the ancestors and consciousness that was laid down long ago and that the features of these make up embodiment, meaning the act of *embodifying* or for example, the ways in which we are embodied by our history. 

*Reciprocity*, meaning the ways in which two people connect to each other and exchange things for mutual expectations and *relatedness*, meaning connected by kinship or common knowledge. Within Arbon’s dotted circle is another circle, this reveals the inner existence to all we know, knowledge and locatedness. The knowledge then draws from the past and locates the person as coming from a strong position in which to work from.

It is important I am able to connect and relate knowledge back and forth within my culture. My community involvement and my arts practice provide a base from which this is possible. Arbon states that it’s her way of knowing and doing. I relate to Arbon’s ideas and in my artworks I have tried to capture my own form of relational knowledge that is Wadawurrung Dreaming.

Professor Brian Martin strengthened my view towards the need to acknowledge Bunjil after a Welcome to Country. Martin states, ‘art does not exist in isolation
from life and culture as it plays a crucial role in cultural life, extending its relationship with country’ (Martin B. 2013: 196). My art connects me to country and Martin’s ideas validate the importance of this connection.

Martin suggests the Western ideal of land is as an object that is bought and owned. He draws on metaphor and layered meaning as it relates to ideology and puts forward the notion that Indigenous cultural ideology involves an ontological relationship moving between, culture, art, country-land, practice and memory as opposed to the imaginary relationship to existence and further states that Aboriginal ‘cultural ideology’ is the ‘real’ world (Martin B. 2013: 186). This knowledge has strengthened the way in which I understand my own practice, especially in relation to talking about the land and memory. It has taught me to not question myself and trust my family memories as our truth as we know it.

Martin reflected upon the work of Badger Bates a Paakantji man from Wilcannia in far west New South Wales and articulated that an alternative framework exists between the materiality of an arts practice operating in the here and now, to the metaphysical element operating at the same time that produces an ontological effect. He states that the ‘country’ is the basis of Indigenous ideology and the spiritual and immaterial nature of Aboriginal culture is a continual practice created by reality of country (Martin B. 2013: 186, 87). Martin’s ideas are valid in supporting my own thesis, and have provided a strong platform on which to build my creative practice.

I have also been inspired by the writing of Karen Martin, a Quandamooka woman who has written a paper titled Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing: a theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous re-search and Indigenist research (2003). Martin discusses the dispossession of knowledges from Indigenous peoples and acknowledges that teaching methodologies, Universities and educational systems aided in the dispossession of this knowledge and that it is time for change (Martin K. 2003: 1

Martin establishes several important ‘ways’ that I have adopted and have found to hold value for my own research and thinking. Firstly is establishing who you are and your background. In stating I am Deanne Gilson and a proud Wadawurrung woman from Ballarat in Victoria, I establish, who I am, my location and that then establishes my cultural, social and other relation to other people in and around me. I am currently studying for a Masters by Research at Deakin University with a view to strengthen the ontological framework of Wadawurrung Dreaming and culture. By stating this Martin says I locate my connection to others and define myself as identifying with elements of Indigenist research. Adding to the strength of the positioning is to state that my position is Aboriginal and viewing anything Western as ‘another’ (Martin K. 2003: 3

Martin maintains that ways of knowing is specific to ontology, entities of land, animals, plants, waterways, skies, climate and spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups. Ways of being is made up of ‘we are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst entities that are reciprocal (meaning, relating to each other or binding together and becoming one) and occur in certain contexts’. She maintains our ways of doing are a synthesis and an articulation of our ways of knowing and ways of being. These are seen in language, art, imagery, technology, traditions and ceremonies, land management practices, social organizations and social control (Martin K. 2003: 10

The artwork of Judy Watson has been pivotal in my understanding of how artists connect with country and family through their art, her work influencing the use of naturally sourced materials within my artwork. Watson is a Waanyi woman and her artwork relates to Country and the land. She takes river water and ochre from her Country and uses it in her creative process. This way of working builds connections to ones’ own Country and reestablishes that connection if the artist has been separated from, or not living on Country. When I first discovered Watson’s work I was struck by its sheer power, presence and beauty. Her
paintings are emotive and evoke mapping, Country, political and social history. She says her work reveals hidden histories and she unveils them by rubbing back the layers of whitewash, referring here to the social and political histories, post colonisation (Chew, Watson 2009: 20). Her work affected my inner self to the point where I now find strength in my art through her vision.


In Vessel (Plate 10), Watson depicts a heart vessel over an ochre country. The heart vessel sits over a landscape, rich in Country but tainted with blood from the colonised past. (Watson 2002: 116). For the past twenty years I have also painted vessels as a metaphor for the body. Watson’s image aligns with my own way of thinking and use of the vessel within my work.

Within some of her work Watson uses ink drawings and etchings over stains of water, inks, paints, dyes, ochre and anything from country that will leave a mark. This imbues the work with a part of one’s landscape and evokes a connection to Country that runs deeper than the surface. The resulting marks and imperfections are reminiscent of the true landscape from where the material comes. Watson’s
work leaves less of a carbon footprint just as our own Aboriginal ancestors would have done.

Plate 11: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Big Yam Dreaming*, 1995. Synthetic polymer on canvas, 291.1 x 801.8 cm
Image sourced National Museum of Australia (accessed November 1, 2014)

I have drawn inspiration, respect and knowledge from the artworks of Emily Kngwarreye. Kngwarreye preserved the culture, history and Dreaming of her people through *Big Yam Dreaming* (Plate 11). The collective consciousness of memory and connection to country is reflective through the painting which relays the story of the yam and its importance in Kngwarreye’s life experience. Yams were an important food source for Kngwarreye, as they would have been for her ancestors, and as they will continue to be for the future generations of her family. The importance of the yam and what it stands for in a cultural context is played out in the painting. Kngwarreye connects with ancestral knowledge and shows the younger generations that yams are important and this forms part of Kngwarreye’s Dreaming (Marsh, 2003: 189). *Big Yam Dreaming*, helped me to move forward in my artwork by showing me that everyday life experiences such as looking for yams relate to Dreaming. The work crosses between the notion of the ancestral Dreaming and the reality of the everyday living. This painting demonstrates how you can remain respectful of the spiritual meaning behind artworks as they have connections to the here and now of what we do in our daily lives. I include elements of my Dreaming within the following artworks.
Creative output and methods used: *Finding Strength in ochre*

Plate 12: *Deanne’s Ochre Palette*, 2014. Photographed by Deanne Gilson

The creative works for this research project began by doing the one thing I knew how to do well. I walked on Country and gathered as much ochre in as many different shades of yellow, white, grey, pink, blue and brown that I could find, see *Deanne’s Ochre Palette* (Plate 12). My ochre travels took me all over Wadawurrung Country from Ballarat, to Anglesea, to Werribee, Torquay, Black Hill in Ballarat and out to Skipton where Mum’s great grandfather was originally removed from Country. I found many of my non-Aboriginal friends willing to share their ochre findings with me and as I began this journey, I discovered the stories of my Aboriginal ancestors in the places where I visited. In order to remain respectful to Country and the spirit of my ancestors I only ever took what ochre I needed for my artworks.

The ochre from my Country inspired the colour palette I used for the paintings and the symbols represented on various clay baskets. I built up the
colours within each painting. The process began with the ground which represented the earth, and for this colour I used a deep red acrylic paint. As stated earlier, I did not use red ochre for cultural reasons. For archival reasons I needed to construct a stable ground for the paintings to withstand the many layers of other media to be included within the artworks. The layering of colours has meaning to me and references the historical, ancestral, social, political issues, stories, Dreaming and Wadawurrung knowledge. Once the ground of the painting was complete I began building up blocks of colour that represented the following elements:

Deep Red: Representing earth, blood and blood loss from my ancestors, love, memory of Country and deep red earth from my own backyard garden.

Blue: Representing sky and water.

Gold: Representing the goldfields of Ballarat, fools’ gold, colonisation, greed, and the beauty that lies beneath my Country.

White ochre: Representing the ancestral spirit (when used as wing including patterns and feathers), purity and innocence of my ancestors’ memory, rebirth, hope, white man (when used in a fingerprint pattern) and the white picket fence (colonisation and boundaries), all white ochre was sourced from Black Hill in Ballarat.

Yellow ochre: represents the earth, connection to Country, happiness, yellow ochre was sourced from Angelsea.


Grey ochre: Sourced from Skipton (I did not use this ochre on this project).

Red ochre: Men’s business, used for diamond patterns when I refer to men

Black charcoal: Used for line work, feathers of my totem Waa the Black Crow, my connection to my children and future link to my grandchildren. The black charcoal was taken from the logs of fire from my son’s eighteenth Birthday party, the black charcoal also represents renewal and resurrection through
ancestral burning of Country.

The next process was stabilising the ochre so that it didn’t fall from the artworks. I experimented with several medium mixtures that I combined with the ochre. This made the material more archival and seemed to strengthen the intensity of colour. I also experimented with oil mediums, as I had come from an oil painting background. I thought the oil based products would resemble traditional mediums used by my ancestors like animal fats, blood, and sap (Couzens 2012). However, the oil-based products were not suitable as they seemed to dissolve the ochre, leaving a fatty oil residue on the paper. I abandoned this process returning to acrylics combined with a small degree of PVA glue, water and crushed ochre, I found this to be the best and strongest mixture when dried. Only small amounts of paint and glue were used so that the natural ochre pigment would not yellow over time. I was cautious of the colours taking on a man-made plastic look and had to be careful when adding paint to ochre, as I wanted a natural colour range representative of my Country connection.

Throughout this process an Elder I had worked with on the Tanderrum Aboriginal Dance Ceremony in Melbourne during 2014 and 2015, informed me about the use of tree saps to make mediums to mix with the ochre. One recipe in particular was mixing wattle tree sap with water to form a paste suitable for mixing with ground ochre. I did not use this technique as I became aware of it when most of my paintings were complete and I was also conscious that sap is more likely to soften and run down trees on hotter days and is easier to collect. I live in Ballarat where the weather is extremely cold for six months of the year, so it was likely that I could not maintain this technique.

During my research at the Melbourne Museum, the South Australian Museum and the National Museum in Canberra, I found several traditional
Wadawurrung artefacts, made either before or during the early colonial period of the 1800s. The artefacts are from the John Von Stieglitz collection held in the National Museum of Northern Ireland, refer to (Plate 13). How the Wadawurrung artefacts came into the hands of John Von Stieglitz is unclear, but they were placed into the collection sometime in 1856 by Von Stieglitz himself, along with another forty-five Aboriginal artefacts Von Stieglitz had collected while on his travels to Australia, including through my Country. The artefacts consisted of three shields, two clubs, one boomerang, one basket and one feather apron (skirt). The artefacts were borrowed re-loaned to the National Museum in Canberra during 2011 - 12 to be included in the ‘Not Just Ned’ exhibition (Goree 2011: 19).


The artefacts, from the Von Stielglitz collection are adorned with several marks that I have chosen to reclaim and incorporate into my artworks. They consist of: The wave pattern, referencing the water; the diamond pattern, referencing country, and cross hatching and individual straight marks as
shown on the shields. White and brown ochre was also painted onto the shields and there are several burn marks that I assume are from fire sticks.

After viewing the museum collections and establishing connections with my ancestral artefacts, I felt I was able to create some new marks that represented my Dreaming journey. I was mindful that these were linked to the original marks and yet remained within the aesthetics of contemporary Aboriginal art. This process happened over a period of time, and as I began the process of reconnecting to my Aboriginal family that I knew very little about. The totem stories and the literature I read also played a part in informing the new symbols. I have only included a few symbols as I need to be sure they are what I want to put out there for my families purpose. The symbols are to share with family and my aim is that they remain respectful of our culture and its spirituality; the symbols had to have deeper meaning, not just a surface beauty for commercial purposes.

The contemporary symbols I developed for use within my artwork include:

**The feather pattern:** taken from our totem Waa the Crow, which is generally a black feather or feathers. When I use the white feather it represents Bunjil our creator and ancestral spirits - my Nan’s spirit and spiritual connection to Country.

**The circle:** the circle symbol represents the mother figure, the womb and a portal to the past and to my ancestors. I see this as my connection to my Nan and to my children at the same time. It’s like an Aboriginal time machine that allowed me to connect to spirit.

**The crucifix:** the sign of the cross references my Nan and Catholicism.

**The breastplate:** this was worn by my ancestor King William (Billy), it represents issues that colonisation inflicted on my people, including repression and degradation, and having to confirm to white people’s ways.

**The crown:** I have a masculine and feminine version of these and they
represent a colonised construct of the label my ancestors were given of King Billy and Queen Mary.

**The white fingerprint:** represents white man and colonisation.

**The white picket fence:** represents the white man, colonisation and boundaries.

**The basket:** A metaphor for the body and family, as with the vessel symbol and traditional baskets/artefacts.

**The greenstone axe head:** I use the outline of a greenstone axe head that was found on my Country by a female member of my family. I have used this image for several years now as a way to reconnect to Country and the spirit of my ancestors. The axe head informs me of the craftsmanship, skills and lived experience of my ancestors and helps me to remain connected and respectful of who they were as the true Traditional custodians of this land. The greenstone itself was mined at a place called Mount William, approximately nine kilometers from Lancefield, by the Wurundjeri Clan, until they were removed from Country and placed into missions like Coranderrk (Mount Willian Quarry, Cultural Victoria 2014). The Wouiwurrung language word for Mount William is Wil-im-ee Moor-ring, meaning axe place (Young 2014). Because Wadawurrung boundaries meet Wurundjeri the greenstone would have been traded to make stone tools and the axe head is evidence of that.

The studio phase of the research was challenging for me as the aesthetic beauty of the work was not my main criteria. Creating the works provided strong links to ceremony that I was not aware of before. I began with small painting studies, see appendix (Plates: 34 - 43), which lead up to the series of larger paintings culminating with the installation of paintings titled *Baskets of Knowledge* (Plate 27). These were followed by the clay installation works as seen in *Warrongawon Veil* (Plate 19) and *Body of My Ancestors* (Plate 29), *Indigo’s Dreaming* (Plate 31) and *Queen Mary Selling Fools Gold, to Fools*
(Plate 34). The small painted studies were important as they sometimes captured initial thoughts or conceptual elements that flowed into the larger artworks. I also find studies to be quite loose and free of over thinking, leading to exciting mark making. I developed my basic feather symbol, from one such a study, (see appendix for feather studies). I refer to my small painting studies as my visual diary, choosing to work on multiple painting studies as opposed to a series of sketches. After working on two-dimensional planes for some time I felt the physical need to create a three-dimensional forms and moved into creating the clay works.

The following artworks are accompanied by artist statements, in order to frame the concepts behind each work. At the end of this chapter I have included a written account of Tanderrum, an Aboriginal Dance Ceremony in which I participated during my candidature. Tanderrum, accounts for the lived experience component of this research and gives strength to the symbols I use; these symbols now form part of my reality as I put them into practice as ceremony.

Drawing on the work of Gordon Bennett as discussed earlier, I painted, *I Am Ballarat Gold* (Plate 14) in which I too have used the words ‘I Am’. The painting challenges the notion that Ballarat was founded by the Goldfields, and represents my ancestors as the first people to have lived on that land. Many of my ancestors died during the colonisation period. With this painting I re-establish Wadawurrung people as still here and living on country. It was thought that that all the Traditional Owners had died but in actual fact we were removed from country and culture and are only now starting to move back to country. We have had to fight very hard in proving our ancestral connections and to regain our voice as the Traditional Owners of the land. This has been achieved through family genealogy and re gaining our cultural heritage connections and by forming Wathcorp. Wathcorp represents and supports all Wadawurrung descendants in all forms of cultural heritage.
In (Plate 14) I position the white fingerprint under the greenstone axe head as a reminder that Ballarat was over-run by English, European and Chinese settlement. By placing a metaphor for self in the form of the ancestral greenstone axe head, (used in a similar way to that of Watson’s vessel in Plate 10), I position myself as my ancestral connection being on land first, portraying that this was and still is Wadawurrung Country.
Glimmers of gold are scattered around the landscape reflecting both a positive and negative history. Ballarat was a rich landscape that saw many people interact with my ancestors and a lot of people lost their lives through gold mining. An example is the Eureka Rebellion, where it is documented that Wadawurrung people were represented in many positions such as child minding, bush postmen and laborers (Cahir F. 2012: 67).
Plate 16: Deanne Gilson, *I Present to You Today, King Billy and Queen Mary of the Wadawurrung Clan*, 2014-15. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic, gold leaf on linen, 90 x 100 cm

In *I Present to You Today, King Billy and Queen Mary of the Wadawurrung Clan* (Plate 16), I have depicted the Australian flag overlaid with what I consider to be Western symbols of colonisation, often displayed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as the breast plate that my ancestor King Billy was made to wear and the crucifix and crown. By doing this I reinstate my ancestors’ importance and ownership of Country as the first people and true sovereigns of the land, thus interfering with the Western titles given to my people by the English. I aim to regain their strength through this painting and acknowledge that the breastplate and Western titles of King and Queen, were in fact derogative titles for my ancestors and not empowering titles for the true sovereigns. I feel this is a reality that non-Aboriginal people have not considered entirely and through this artwork I give William and Mary a voice. I relate this painting to the work of Gordon Bennett as he had similar
concerns with the racial issues resulting from colonial practices.

Reflecting on Bennett’s influence, I have included a painting that acknowledges his insight and influence on me. *Homage to Gordon Bennett* (Plate 17) responds to Bennett’s untimely passing in 2014. In this work I painted a repetitive white picket fence over the red bloodied landscape. Bennett’s and my own work has a human component and this painting acknowledges that; the stories are not always easy to tell. I later painted Bloody Mary (Plate 18) over the top of (Plate 17) leaving remnants of the fence and Bennett’s memory under the layers. I felt that it was not my place to depict Bennett’s story in this way. In repainting the work, I reflected the image to my own family history.

Plate 17: Deanne Gilson, *Homage to Gordon Bennett*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, acrylic on linen, 80 x 100 cm
Plate 18: Deanne Gilson, *Bloody Mary*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic on linen, 90 x 100 cm

By placing my ancestor Mary over the top layers of the painting I felt as though her voice could be heard for the first time from an Aboriginal perspective. This painting connects not only to Bennett but to the effects of a troubled history of my own immediate family. This piece was meant to be exhibited with the artwork of my cousin Neil as part of an exhibition at The Melbourne Museum, titled, *Wadawurrung Past, Present and Future*, in 2014 – 15, but sadly like Bennett, my cousin also passed during this time, taking with him his knowledge and love of art.

The clay installation, *Warrongawon Veil* meaning to mourn the veil (Plate 19) took four months to complete. Reflecting my Nan’s story, the veil is a response to the abuse suffered by women under the veil of religious institutions and marriage.
Plate 19: Deanne Gilson, *Warrongawon Veil* (to mourn the veil), 2014. Paperclay, tulle, wire, wood, 90 x 170 cm

*Warrongawon Veil* is a feminine inspired piece that aims to heal and restore the faith and dignity of women. My intention with the veil was to show a fragile state of mind, but at the same time portray strength. The image of the angel’s wing when lit up, gives the work a sense of calmness and healing. My Nan was a devout Catholic and talked to me about angels before she passed, saying to look for them in my dreams.

The veil consists of over seven hundred and fifty clay feathers, imbued with hand carved symbols the traditional marks that I have reclaimed, consisting of the diamond and wave pattern, coupled with the symbol of the circle. The feather from my totems, Waa the Crow and Bunjil the Eagle are depicted in white and represent ancestral spirit. The circle links to the spirit through the portal and the womb as discussed earlier.
In the exhibition, the ceramic veil is surrounded by a white picket fence, the inspiration for this drawn from the photo of Mary in (Plate 2). I felt the fence represented a negative image for Mary, as it was used to keep her contained within an area, showing a fenced in situation or a boundary. For many the notion of the white house and picket fence stands for an ideal home and Mary’s actual reality and possibly my Nan’s, would have been the opposite to what the image portrays.

*Oneness* (Plate 20) represents the feathers of my totem Waa the Crow. In this painting the white feather symbolises Western society, Aboriginal spiritual links. The painting has one black feather, which I drew with charcoal sourced from a fire at my son’s eighteenth birthday party. Turning eighteen is a sign of standing alone and becoming an adult. The black feather stands alone with the aim to reconcile with the white feathers. As the title suggests *Oneness* portrays unity and an appreciation for each other.
I found using the ochre on this painting had created a soft velvety effect. I had an urge to paint with the canvas placed on the ground instead of on an easel. Before coming to this research project I had never painted with ochre and I found that I was now really enjoying the process. My work became less about the image, which were usually figurative in my work, and more about the act of working with the earth. I had the strange sensation of being in my own yarning circle, celebrating my connection to the land and the gift the newly found medium of ochre had given me. The process went beyond the purpose in that sense and it helped me to understand works like that of Kngwarreye’s Big Yam Dreaming (Plate 10). I became part of my own Dreaming when I made that connection, it was a powerful moment for me as I was working with Country for the first time. Country became connected back to me and to my children through the use of the
charcoal from my son’s eighteenth birthday fire. I had created an act that referenced my ancestors in a way in which they had expressed themselves thousands of years ago, and for that I have a new appreciation that my culture is still here and I am living in it through my art.

Plate 21: Deanne Gilson, Waa, Watching Me, Watching You, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, acrylic on linen, 90 x 100 cm

In (Plate 21), Waa Watching Me, Watching You, I have given myself and my ancestors strength in the form of watching what is going on around me and by positioning myself from within an Aboriginal perspective and that I have looked at Western philosophy from an outsiders point of view. In this painting my totem
Waa the Crow is observing and watching the white swan. Taken from the Greek myth, Leda and the Swan (Astma, 2000 – 2015). Waa is not sure if the swan is in fact a swan or the Greek God Zeus, who took the form of a swan and seduced Leda. Waa is weary of Greek mythology and doesn’t trust everything he/she sees or hears, Waa Watching Me, Watching You, is a metaphor for my own thinking and learning. Waa is thinking about thinking. This strengthens the notion that Waa is more concerned with connection to Country and the issues of the here and now for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and not what has been constructed in Western cultures as far as philosophy and literature goes.


In (Plate 22), Behind the White Picket Fence, I have further explored the symbol of the white picket fence, stemming again from the original photograph of Mary. I use the white picket fence as a metaphor for colonisation and have placed it over the Aboriginal flag. This reflects the placement of Western literature over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and the physical aspect of governing my people. It reflects current issues of oppression and restrictions
around living and culture that are still being felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today.


*Past, Present and Future* (Plate 23), was initially painted in 2014 and exhibited at The Melbourne Museum during 2014 -15. The painting depicts a spiritual connection, as Nan and I stand on our ancestral Country of Ballarat, in Victoria. We appear in the form of our totem Waa the Crow. I am a black crow living in the present and my Nan is an angelic white spirit from the past, approaching to give me a message for the future. Between both crows is a message stick with my Nan’s wedding ring sitting on it, a final gift to me before she passed. The crow eggs tell a story of Wadawurrung people living today, having children and occupying traditional lands.

After making this piece I felt it was too personal and needed only to express a general notion of place and Country without being too representative of actual people and the personal moments my Nan and I had shared. It was a difficult piece to paint and took three months to complete. Once I moved through the emotions of acknowledgement and being grateful for what I had been given by my Nan, I decided to let the painting become less emotive and
more symbolic of my culture. I painted over the piece, leaving fragments of the landscape and the memories we had shared emerging from beneath the new layers of paint. I used the feather symbol to cover most of the original image and kept the Waa totem eggs to represent my two children and my future grandchildren. From this painting I would like my children to gain a sense of continuation of culture rather than to let it die out when the Elders pass on. I painted the traditional diamond pattern behind the feathers as it links to the past. My dual black and white identity is expressed through the black and white feathers. I feel the painting now reads clearer and the symbols stand out more; for me it now appears stronger than the first painting.

Plate 24: Deanne Gilson, *Past, Present and Future*, 2015. Black Hill white ochre, gold leaf, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150 cm
Plate 25: Deanne Gilson, Wadawurrung Camping Alongside Werribee River, 2015. Black Hill white ochre, acrylic, gold leaf, charcoal from my fire on linen, 120 x 150 cm

*Wadawurrung Camping Alongside Werribee River* (Plate 25) highlights the importance of linking my ancestral culture to the present day activities of my family and for the future continuation of our Clan. Here I have depicted the memory of my ancestors camping and living off the land. Stone tool artefacts and other important objects are scattered throughout the landscape. The yam daisy, a food source for the Wadawurrung people, is referenced around the trees, along with the depiction of gold signifying the role it played throughout the colonisation period.

Ochre from country (Black Hill) and charcoal from my personal fire have been used to strengthen my bond with Country, memory and the reality of my ancestral existence, acknowledging a thriving and fluid culture that continues today.
Bunjil the Eagle flies over on dusk, watching and protecting his people. The bird image could also be seen as Waa, it represents both. The bracken hills reference my childhood growing up in Gordon and playing in the bracken. While I was studying my Bachelor in Visual Arts I worked alongside the Werribee River, as a cultural field officer, overseeing artefact excavations. This experience enabled me to form links with my ancestors, culture and Country and it also inspired this painting.

Plate 26: Deanne Gilson, *Rita*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic on linen, 90 x 100 cm

The painting titled *Rita* (plate 26) symbolises my Nan. The image is a basket painted over a white fingerprint similar to that used in *I Am Ballarat Gold* (Plate 14). The image of a basket was inspired by the Victorian collection of baskets held at the Melbourne Museum. I have participated in basket weaving workshops and yarning circles where I have learnt the stories from
other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, strengthening my own Dreaming. I hope that my creative skills in paint and clay will be seen to have similar importance as through these media I speak of my Dreaming and so continue my culture. *Rita* (Plate 26), is not just a painting of a basket, it is a way of being, living and doing for me that I have known since childhood.

After I had painted the single basket in (Plate 26) I decided to make several more artworks exploring this theme. I have observed that when a group of weavers sit down and make baskets, stories are shared and the baskets capture the knowledge that is spoken, through subtle changes like the look of the baskets themselves. The newly inspired skills and techniques from within the group form the collective knowledge of the group. The baskets created then become important as they contain knowledge and can be used as learning tools for the next generation. This then generates more yarning circles; the objects take on a life separate to the maker, they form part of the Dreaming and memory consciousness of many, not just one person. My paintings of the baskets in *Baskets of Knowledge* (Plate 27) and my clay baskets titled: *Body of My Ancestors* in (Plate 29) then form links with the older stories and they create an opportunity to inspire more people which continues the stories. I become part of the circle of knowledge that is shared from the initial baskets; the yarning circle is still evident but has taken on a conceptual form. This relationship is not a straight line, but a continual fluid, changing circle moving around and generating knowledge.

I have taken the following quote form Lak Lak Burarrwanga, an Elder from the Datiwuy people, of her father’s clan and a caretaker for the Gumatj from her mother’s clan. It gave me a clear insight to the basket and all it stands for in my artwork:

‘The basket holds our families, our stories, our knowledge, our language, our lore and even our men’s and women’s power... For us the basket is a symbol of the things that we have, that we know and that we can share’ (Burarrwanga in Bolton 2011: 96).
In (Plate 27) I have shown a large-scale painting installation that comprises of forty-eight paintings depicting baskets. The images for the paintings were inspired by fifty baskets held in the Melbourne Museum Victorian Aboriginal basket collection. The central basket represents my Nan and displays the Wadawurrung language wording meaning mother. The mother basket is the creator and centre of knowledge that is spread within my family. I worked with the number forty-eight because that is my age at the time of doing this research, the number of years of knowledge that I contain. The white fingerprint under the basket signifies colonisation by white man, although by placing the basket over the top of the fingerprint, I place myself and the knowledge of my ancestors first and still on country. The background is my country and the wings are my ancestors watching over me. Spirit, Country, yarning, symbols like the circle and the diamond pattern, along with other symbols I have developed on this journey are used within the forty-eight basket paintings.
After completing the paintings of the baskets I felt the need to create more in three-dimensional form. The following clay installation is titled *Body of My Ancestors* (Plate 29) and it has inspired the title of my overall thesis.

I began the clay baskets by making cardboard patterns and templates to help me decide on the size and the form of the baskets. I experimented with two different types of clay to use for the baskets. Normally in such a research environment it would make sense to dig clay from my own Country to strengthen the work, however I found an alternative that I felt reclaimed strength from a historical point of view. For most of the baskets I used black earthenware clay sourced from Ireland. This connection gave me a link to my ancestral artefacts held in the Irish collection and I felt it was a way of taking back what was taken from my ancestors. Because there is no evidence of how those artefacts were acquired and whether they were traded in an ethical way, I feel that I needed to acknowledge that they do exist and that I am still connected to those pieces. I have spent over two years attempting to communicate with the National Museum of Ireland regarding their provenance but I have not received a response.

Inspired by the baskets in the Melbourne Museum, each clay basket relates to important people and lived experiences in my life. In the museum collection I found one basket over eighty years old and I was surprised to see how it resembled purses and handbags from the 1940s and 1950s, made for the white Australian fashion scene, see (Plate 28). This particular basket and also purses from the 1940s era reminded me of my Nan. From this experience I made my first basket titled, *Ngerren-boopma Ngardang* (Loving Nan) a replica of the eighty-year old basket, the original maker unknown.
The baskets form an installation that were displayed in a yarning circle arrangement, with message sticks and ceramic hearts connecting them.

Most of the baskets are self-explanatory and stand for the metaphor of the body in that they represent family members, but there are two other baskets that need further explanation. The first one being, the only white basket in the installation, titled *Daf’s Dreaming*. This basket is based on a friend of thirty-three years, who passed away during my candidature and I pay homage to her even though she is not Aboriginal. The second basket is titled *My Blood* and refers to my children. When I gave birth to my two boys I kept their umbilical cords and I later discovered that in Arnhem Land Aboriginal mothers kept their children’s umbilical cords and placed them in small clay vessels or woven baskets and carried them with them for the course of their lifetime. As a mother I connected with this experience and created my own basket to do the same (Bolton 2011: 17).

The following titles refer to other baskets created for the *Body of My Ancestors*, installation:

The final artwork I will discuss is *Indigo’s Dreaming* (Plate 31). It was inspired by my niece Indigo. The children are the future generations and I wanted to say something about the future and how the children can link in with our culture.

I found a photograph of Aboriginal children playing dress ups in a natural setting, with toys that they had made themselves (Plate 30). The children had made clay bras and babies, along with paper bark coolamons to hold their babies in. In *Indigo’s Dreaming* I have recreated children at play in this way. I have used Indigo’s hair to connect some of the bras and hand painted them with the traditional and contemporary symbols I have been collecting. The fifty clay bras were hung on a wall with the babies placed underneath them. I have used feathers gathered from my daily walks over the last two years. The feathers depict Waa the Crow and the white feather placed on the central bra, depicts innocence and a child-like state of mind.

Plate 31: Deanne Gilson, Indigo’s Dreaming, 2015, clay, jute string, ochre, acrylic, feathers, 300 x 400cm
Plate 32: Deanne Gilson, Picture taken by Tammy Gilson at Tanderrum, 2015
The circle above the breastbone referencing the mother symbol, womb and portal to the ancestors, the white lines represent ancestral lines that continue today

Tanderrum is a welcoming ceremony consisting of dance, music and ritual that was initially an essential part of the five Eastern Kulin tribes of Victoria.

During 2014 and again in 2015 I participated in Tanderrum and had the opportunity to relive the experiences of my ancestors and to connect for the first time with dance, music and ceremonial practices of my culture, that were lost or not allowed to be practiced under colonisation. I joined together with my children, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunties, nieces and nephews for this experience. Participation in Tanderrum has allowed me to actively find ways in
which I can access aspects of my culture, practiced pre-colonisation and to draw
upon the experiences of my ancestors to shape the experiences of my children
today.

During Tanderrum in 2014, I was fortunate enough to work with renowned
Aboriginal artist Maree Clarke. Maree a Mutti Mutti, Yorta Yorta, Boon Wurrung
woman, assisted our my family with accessing her vast knowledge in making
traditional women’s, skirts, armbands and other garments for us to wear during
ceremony.

Tanderrum took place for the third time in 2015 and it is important to note that it
has not been practiced for one hundred and fifty years since colonisation. With
the help from the Iibirri Theatre Company and The Melbourne City Council,
funding had been allocated for the Kulin Nations to reconnect through creating
new dances, costumes, music and with the aim of the Elders to reform the old
connections of our ancestors.

My role in Tanderrum has been to create new women’s costumes to dance in, and
to further adorn our bodies with ochre symbols that reflect Wadawurrung women
today and connect with past body patterns. I also assisted in creating new songs
that have brought our language back for the first time in a public place, and allow
us a chance to teach our children Wadawurrung language. (Plate 32) shows
myself dressed and ready to dance ceremony. The circle symbol is used on the
females to connect with the mother spirit and it also stands for the earth
connection and the womb. I found the symbols to be really powerful when used
on the body whilst singing and dancing; for me the symbol had a deeper power
than when it was used on the artworks.

My involvement in Tanderrum has answered some of my earlier questioning
regarding my connection to spirit and place, and how I can find ways in which to
do this. At this point I wish to acknowledge that dance, music, language and
ceremony also form part of my art, and that visual imagery can take any or all of
these forms, not just paint, clay and installation works. The symbols used in Tanderrum have been developed through my artworks and this research project.

I have also included here, evidence of our newly created welcome song as performed in Tanderrum 2014, in order to validate the impact of Tanderrum and its importance for Wadawurrung culture and our connection to Country through song and dance.

Bengwudjak, Wadawurrung, Bengwudjak Wadawurrung, Munyi
Bengwudjak, Wadawurrung, Bengwudjak Wadawurrung, Munya
Bengwudjak Wadawurrung, Bengwudjak Wadawurrung, Kimbarne,
Kimbarne, Munya, Munyi

English translation:

We are Wadawurrung, we are here
We are Wadawurrung, here we stand,
We are here. (Powell, B and Gilson, T, 2014).
Conclusion: Wadawurrung Dreaming and the future

Throughout this journey I have looked at how historical and social views after colonisation have affected my Aboriginal ancestors and also my family today. I have investigated museum and library archives, explored ancestral marks, artefacts, photographs, oral histories passed down from my Mum and beforehand from her grandmother and relevant stories by my extended family and Aboriginal community. The information I have collected has then gone in to creating a visual body of artworks that reflect on place, Country and the notion of spirit.

The knowledge I have gathered has empowered my research and provided material that I will continue to use in future works. The connections and bonds made within this project through yarning with family have helped me to understand the reality of my Aboriginal ancestral past and given me the ability to reflect upon this in artworks. The artwork I have created within this thesis is presented in a way that treads gently alongside the footsteps walked by my Aboriginal ancestors and it takes into consideration the Western artistic influences that have intuitively been incorporated in to the composition and mark making aspect of the artwork. It draws a distinct line between Aboriginal Dreaming learnt through my lived experience and the Western philosophical ideology from which I detach myself.

It has become important to me to continue the revival of traditional ways such as ochre painting, body painting used in events like the Tanderrum ceremony and clay basket making, all for the emotional wellbeing that Grieves talks about. This wellbeing is part of my creation and for the first time I also acknowledge it as a valid condition in which to work within my visual arts practice. By finding the emotional space that enables contentment where I feel culturally safe, I am able to connect with the outside community. This knowing allows me the opportunity to start talking about my culture and
sharing culture to a broader community. It has opened a door for sharing my knowledge.

As a Traditional owner from the Ballarat area, I have been able to revive the use of ochre from country and feel this was one of the strongest and most empowering things I could have done within this research. The benefits of this had a ripple-like effect on my children and I. My eldest son Blair, took it upon himself to go and find the best ochre he could source, all the time doing this on bike rides around town and this in itself empowered my child to be part of my journey while also creating a new journey for himself. This act aided in Blair’s own emotional wellbeing. By using the ochre, this contributed to my immediate family’s Dreaming and yarning and created a new cultural connection. The discovery of the traditional binding techniques my Elders are using in ceremonies, was inspiring and will be something that I will pass down to my children, and I will do further experiments with this in the future. Like the yarning circles the knowledge to be still learnt from the traditional ways is something I will continue to seek and explore.

Within the narrative of the paintings and clay works are the symbols that were drawn from traditional artefacts together with the developed contemporary ones. The symbols provide a connection to culture as they represent aspects of Dreaming, spirit and country. The symbolic marks used in artworks will be used in future works, ceremonial events and become part of the new knowledge that I will share within my teaching and art practice. The symbols will continue to be developed further as new knowledge and experiences come into my life and form a foundation of material for my grandchildren to use in a similar way, especially in ceremony.

Through the exhibition my artwork has the capacity to create awareness of Wadawurrung Culture. Several artworks that I created in 2014 were pre-selected to be exhibited in four prominent Art Award exhibitions. These included, The Wadawurrung Cultural Tree of Knowledge, which was shown in
the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards, 2014. It won the Australian Catholic University Prize for artwork that acknowledged and best represented an Aboriginal connection to the spiritual aspects of culture and connection to Country.

Another artwork selected into the Deakin University Small Sculpture Award, 2014, was the Photo Box inspired artwork titled, *White Haze, Black Gaze* (Plate 43), which is documented in the appendix. This was a conceptual work based on Dr. Kathleen Butler’s literature and discussed in the literature review. This work was further selected in the Incinerator Art Award 2014.

*Warrongawon Veil* was shortlisted in the Victorian Indigenous Ceramic Art Awards, Shepparton 2014, and later in the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards, 2014. The veil was a key artwork that opened up a dialogue with the general public and the broader cultural community. Through an artist talk the veil enabled many people to connect with and relay their own narratives about the work. These conversations made me realise how powerful my art could be in highlighting issues that are not easily talked about. The veil became a healing tool for myself and I realised that this type of artwork brought up many sensitive issues, along with giving validation to the fact that I am not alone in my journey and that others have similar experiences. Through this, I gained the knowledge that my art is not separate from my life but a part of it that exists at the same time. The veil itself projected the symbols of my culture for all to see and I feel it was the right piece to showcase the symbols in a powerful way. The circle, wave and diamond patterns formed stronger links when embedded within the veil because they drew upon ancestral marks. Throughout this exhibition the general public were really interested in what the symbols carved into the feathers meant. By having these conversations with people I found that I was able to share my culture and the symbolic connections I had developed myself through the contemporary symbols or through telling the stories of my ancestors’ journey.
Making and exhibiting artwork has become a way to express my emotions and unravel the day-to-day occurrences that take place in my life.

The basket forms have become a strong metaphor for my family and the knowledge they contain. This work and has given my story a voice through the figurative forms I have used. Working with clay also draws connections to my early childhood experiences of making clay vessels, and it helped me deal with strong emotions, oral stories, family influences, social issues and life in general.

Reflecting on the earlier questioning of how my artworks remain respectful to the spiritual elements incorporated within them and provide a contemporary platform for new storytelling, I feel that there really is no right or wrong way to do this. I have tried to work within some cultural considerations, such as not using red ochre as previously mentioned because of its use in men’s ceremonies and this is how I have chosen to work within what I call the spiritual elements. I have done this so as to not upset my ancestors and the Aboriginal Elder who gave me this information. I acknowledge through this action that his truth is my reality. Artworks relating to lived experiences and spiritual elements have been carefully considered from an Aboriginal perspective and I have found strength in knowing that I have contributed in delivering this knowledge for others to consider when making art or talking, writing and sharing Aboriginal Dreaming.

The clay baskets represent family members and stand as a metaphor for the body. This has given me a deeper sense of respect for the artwork and its underlying connection to me. Through the clay forms a hidden truth has been revealed with the objects reflecting more than aesthetic beauty, conceptually they are much more than that. My artistic body of work lies in moving between the spiritual acceptance of the other unseen aspects at play within my work and the reality of life and what is happening in the moment.
The unseen is something that as an artist I am willing to open myself up to and will leave this research project with an unexpected and unexplained photograph I took on a sunny day in my room, see (Plate 33), where all of the baskets I created for the Masters project were being stored. When viewing photographs I had taken in the well-lit room, I saw a green orb placed over one of the message sticks. The orb is actually making a new message stick of its own and appears to be pointing to another basket. The basket it is pointing to relates to my cousin who passed away just prior to the beginning of this project and stands as a sign for me that I am in the presence of my ancestors and that they have been with me on this journey. This does not fit into what constitutes academic research but fits into an Aboriginal Dreaming perspective and validates to me that I have been given a message and it is this knowledge that I take with me to my next artistic project. I have been privileged to work with my ancestors and all they have given me on this journey, without them, none of this is possible. I am Wadawurrung and this is my Dreaming.

Plate 33: One Sunny Day, 2015. Photographed by Deanne Gilson
Appendix: Thesis studies

In this section I have created several studies that I refer to as my visual diary in the sense that they were made before the final completed works. The studies are a way of consolidating my ideas and mapping out the aesthetics of the larger works. They are to be viewed like a sketchbook of ideas.

Plate 34: Deanne Gilson, Queen Mary, Selling Fools Gold, to Fools, 2014 – 15, copper, fool’s gold, black clay, 30 x 40 cm

In (Plate 34) Queen Mary, Selling Fools Gold to Fools, I have chosen to place Queen Mary on a gold pan and have dressed her in the clothes she was photographed in by Fred Kruger. This is a study of Mary and intended to shift the gaze from a derogative and racist viewpoint to enabling the image of Mary to
regain some power about her difficult circumstances and strengthen the Aboriginal connection to the goldfields and Country.

Plate 35: Deanne Gilson, Feather study: Waq, 2014. Charcoal from my fire, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm

Plate 36: Deanne Gilson, Feather study: Bunjil and Waq, 2014. Black hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm
Plate 37: Deanne Gilson, Basket study: *Body of My Ancestors*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm

Plate 38: Deanne Gilson, *Blood Circle*, 2014. Black hill white ochre, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm
Plate 39: Deanne Gilson, *Oneness study*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm

Plate 40: Deanne Gilson, *Fenced In*, study, 2014. Black hill white ochre, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30 cm
Plate 41: Deanne Gilson, *Black and White Identity*, 2014. Black Hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic on linen, 90 x 100 cm

Plate 42: Deanne Gilson, *Black Gaze*, 2014. Black hill white ochre, charcoal from my fire, acrylic, gold leaf, on linen, 90 x 100 cm
Plate 43: Deanne Gilson, White Gaze, Black Haze, 2014, family photographs on cardboard boxes, 50 x 50 cm
Glossary of Wadawurrung Language

Nyoora Wooryeenn – Hello how are you? (these words cannot be spilt)
Narryeek – My name is
Wadawurrung ach dya-nook – This is Wadawurrung land
Kimbarne – We are here
Bengwudjak – We are
Bunjil – Eagle (Creator Spirit)
Waa – The Crow Ancestor Spirit
Tanderrum – Ceremony/Dance
Ngardang – Mother
Gurrau – Father
Guli- Man
Tjatjarrang – Elder sister
Barmbarre – Young Sister
Wardang – Elder brother
Wangat – Younger brother
Babab – Child
Baby – Pupup
Mirri – Sun, day
Basket – Binyak
Black (colour) – Wurrgarabil
Blue – Marra-narrap
Blood - Kurrk
Body – Durrap, beng (flesh)
Breast – Baab
Feather – Kurran
Red – Dirrk-warrin
Spirit ghost Murrup/Murrum
Womb - Galirrng
White (colour) – Darn-garrabil
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