

2020

I walk to see, I walk to know: Walking to Wongawol. An exhibition and I walk to see, I walk to know: Walking to Wongawol. An exegesis

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I walk to see, I walk to know: Walking to Wongawol

An exhibition

and

I walk to see, I walk to know: Walking to Wongawol

An exegesis

This exegesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the degree of

Master of Arts by Research

Cim Sears

Edith Cowan University

School of Arts and Humanities

VISUAL ARTS

2020

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ABSTRACT

The context of my embodied project, *I Walk to See, I Walk to Know: Walking to Wongawol*, is an exploration into 1) the absence of Western Desert Aboriginal narratives via the act of walking as knowing and 2) my recently discovered ancestral connections, which were historically erased by the state. The location of my project is Wongawol Station in the Western Desert, Western Australia, where my Indigenous ancestors lived, and whose lives I draw upon to make connections with the narratives and sensations of the desert landscape. I use the methodology of walking to investigate the interconnectivity between body and space/place and how this might be interpreted in relation to my research. For Nandi Chinna (2014), walking defines the body as the sensory vessel that can experience the dimensions of told and untold narratives of life on earth. I further explore the act of walking through the lens of rhythm analysis—an approach that refers to how movement is a primary way of “engaging with the world” (Chen, 2013, p. 531). This is illustrated by works such as Raban’s *Fergus Walking* (Chen, 2013), a structural film that experiments within a non-binary representation of walking within disrupted notions of time and space. Expanding on this idea, I have incorporated Derrida’s concepts of absence/presence within language/text, time and space as informed by his deconstructionism and non-binary phenomenology to disrupt accepted literary and philosophical dichotomies. Indigenous film maker Thornton (2018) is also examined from the perspective of cinematography techniques in relation to body, memory, history and the land. Anselm Kiefer’s artworks, which convey the effects of Nazi Germany’s holocaust, allow a potent comparison reflecting “an intimate involvement with destruction and apocalypse [which acts] to provoke and keep memory alive” (Spies, 2016, p. 17). Underpinning my practice-led research are the writings of phenomenologists Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2012) and Heidegger (1962), who believe that the body and the world cannot be separated and that the body is essentially the primary place of knowing and interpreting the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012): “my existence as subjectivity is identical with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world” (p. 431).

The resultant dynamism and potentialities of working with materials to define the place/space of my ancestors comprises the act of walking, field notes, archives, photographic processes, ceramics and print processes. Further, the knowledge gained from acute immersive processes, experiential outcomes in situ and references to government documents characterises this exegesis as preparatory work towards a much larger body of research yet to be undertaken.

DECLARATION

I certify that this exegesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:
incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree
or diploma in any institution of higher education; contain any material previously
published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the
text of this exegesis; or contain any defamatory material.

Name: Cim Sears

Date: 13 October 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank with deep gratitude my supervisors for their untiring guidance, expertise, enthusiasm and heartfelt interest in my project. I would particularly like to thank my principal supervisor, Dr Paul Uhlmann, for continually challenging and encouraging me to write about areas that at first seemed confronting, and for teaching me the importance and power of line. I also sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr Marcella Polain, for imparting and sharing her clarity of thinking and for the confidence she gave me to write and to enter the world of a writer.

I also wish to thank special friends and family who have supported and assisted me throughout my project and journeys. I deeply acknowledge and thank the ancestors and custodians of the land called Wongawol. Lastly, I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Mr and Mrs Snell and their family for their great interest, support and friendship and for making me feel welcome at their station, Wongawol.

I dedicate this project and all the stories to my mother.

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PART ONE

Methodology and Techniques of Embodiment

BACKGROUND

The background to my visual arts practice-led research project is a disturbing time in the history of Western Australia (1902–1936) between its white inhabitants and its Indigenous population. The *Native Administration Act 1936* (WA) [1] was passed, allowing the Chief Protector complete control over the lives of every Indigenous person in the state and resulting in the forced removal of Indigenous children from their parents. The children were taken far from their homes, institutionalised and trained to be unpaid farm hands and domestic help for white farming families. Recorded family histories (Department of Indigenous Affairs, Western Australia [WA]) detail the vast devastation through violent removal and displacement of people during this sorrowful and harrowing time. My mother was just over a year old when this happened to her. She was among the first wave of what has come to be known as the Stolen Generations (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

I travelled to the station in the remote part of the Western Desert on the edge of Lake Carnegie where this occurred, and I walked, observed and experienced the land where my mother and her family lived. Though her life flows deep within my consciousness and resides in my DNA, initially it was not the primary focus of my creative research. Instead, I was drawn to the interrelations between body and place, space and time, which were, nevertheless, inspired by my mother's life and that of my ancestors. I was drawn to walk the places they walked, to experience the place where my mother was born. I wanted to know and experience the trees that grew there, the flowers and the seasons, the night sky and the geological formations. I wanted to know what my ancestors felt on their skin as they walked in the desert environment, what sounds they heard, what air and smells they inhaled into their lungs. I was drawn to walk this land to feel, see and hear what the earth might reveal, to explore the timeless relationship my ancestors had with the land, and to uncover the stories and the absences that characterise their silent footsteps.

As I became deeply immersed in my research, revelations about the history of Wongawol and my Indigenous family began to emerge. I made three field trips to

Wongawol which presented a swathe of new information, enabling me to follow threads that led either to facts or questions that required further searches through the State Records Office, past government gazettes, anthropological studies and other documents. My relationship with the station owners has become very strong and is characterised by a shared interest in the history of Wongawol, since one of the owners was a writer with a previous career in agricultural science and journalism and has researched the pastoralist history of Wongawol for many years. However, the early history before their grandfather purchased the station in 1951 was unknown to us all. After his untimely death, his daughter took over the running of Wongawol and several other stations in the Western Desert region, which partly surround the vast Lake Carnegie.

When I embarked on this journey I knew very little of Wongawol's white pastoralist history and first saw a picture of my white great grandfather, who founded the station in 1902, on the wall of the station's mustering dining room. It was indeed a strange sensation and there were more of this kind of revelation after I was shown an early photograph album depicting life on Wongowol around the 1950s. Subsequent to my third field trip, through dogged persistence, I acquired restricted government files on Wongawol from the early 1900s to 1949, which will necessitate a separate, comprehensive research paper and exploration in the future. This exegesis, while informed by some of the relevant factual events recorded in the recently acquired documents, should be regarded as an important reconnaissance mission, a comprehensive imbedding of me as researcher into this (my own) history and an introduction to what will become life-long research.

INTRODUCTION

The first part of this paper is an exploration into the varied tools I have used to, firstly, find a faint thread or possible lead; secondly, become historically informed; and thirdly, take from other artists, theorists or any other source that resonated with my being, that which I thought or imagined would be of some help in my quest. The second part of this paper is an experiential unfolding of my time, my physical being, in

the desert landscape of Wongawol. The three fieldtrips became infinitely more than information gathering exercises; they were immersive experiences far beyond my expectations. They represented a life-long search for my family and the question of where we came from—that is, what calamitous event in this state of Western Australia was able to strike half of my family from history to the degree that I had to start research into those ancestors from a place of unknowing and imagining. Therefore, I will go into some detail about the tools and influences I used to embark on this journey, which may initially seem disparate, such as the walking phenomenon of a city environment; but, I stress, all the tools have equipped me in important ways to form my sense of embodied knowledge. The final part of the exegesis forms a synthesis of part one and two, and offers conclusions about why the project is worthwhile and why this research matters now.

By way of an explanation, the notion of walking as a vehicle for creative exploration and methodology is increasingly being used in practice-led research to explore, discover and critically analyse social, cultural and environmental phenomena. Walking is generally thought of as a mundane activity; however, increasing mindfulness reveals that the simple act of walking is a vital part of our existence that has shaped how we interact with each other and the planet on which we live (Chen, 2013). Walking as knowing is the central tenet of my visual arts practice-led research project, which involves an extensive exploration into the interactivity, connectivity and interrelationship between me, my lost family and the landscape of the Western Desert. The removal of my mother and my ancestors from this desert place has created a cultural and historical absence and a psychological void, which I am compelled to investigate.

Practice-led research “presumes a process of the development and testing of knowledge which has an outcome in the production of works of art, design, performance and professional practices” (Jolly, 2019, p. 1). Essentially, it is characterised by three parts: “the practitioner, the creative product and the critical process” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 47). These are separate; however, the act of making is central to the possibilities of new knowledge. Practice-led research often starts from a place of unknowing and moves to the realm of knowing: “serendipity and intuition that

direct attention to unanticipated possibilities has long been a valued part of experimental enquiry” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48). Intense focus and concentration during the creative phase of doing can unfold associations that may lead to new meanings and new knowledge. This may be described as “critical reflection [and] reflexive action” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48). The “making space” (p. 49) is the vital process of creativity in a chosen medium or mediums. Creative processes can be a potent tool in describing, exploring and discovering, leading to new narratives and new ways of thinking. Representations of landscape in the form of artworks and text, therefore, can be particularly powerful methods to equate, reveal and explore the human condition and to question and move towards an understanding of its complexity.

The processes of “critical reflection [and] reflexive action” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48), have the capacity to establish new possibilities in the realm of academic research through the engagement of intense concentration, repetition and attention to detail. Working with the physicality of a medium and being aware of the reflexivity of one’s actions, explorations and tangible art or studio practices, the researcher also becomes the researched (Sullivan, 2009). It has been found that intense “studio inquiry undertaken within a research context in an academic setting generates imaginative outcomes” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 49), which can lead to strong challenges to existing cores of knowledge. This is considered an important contribution and characteristic of practice-led research.

Reflexivity is core to the success of my engagement with the potentialities of my research experiences. Its application continues to aid in the exploration of the real and imagined trails my ancestors took around, and of the long distances from, Wongawol Station and how I might signify this journeying in a tangible way. Therefore, I am interested in how repetition represents a circular, timeless view of life. In the Western Desert locale of my research there are four last generations of females in my maternal ancestral line who have walked this country and who are mentioned in the government files (Department of Indigenous Affairs, WA, personal communications, 2005). By employing reflexivity and the notion of repetition throughout immersive walks and my creative art processes, fragments of connections may be revealed as the desert landscape gives up its stories. Human life over time treads, passes, engages—

and it is the possibilities of these continually unfolding threads and traces that I have attempted to record via walking and making. The invisible boundaries and convergences between the substance of the earth or place and the thin osmotic membranes of the body present potentialities that are closely observed, experienced and documented.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How might the act of walking:

- Enable the gathering of research data that, through the making of art, contribute to reinstating knowledge of my family background and, more broadly, of the Indigenous people of the Western Desert?
- Enable the exploration of the presence/absence of history in the place where my ancestors walked and lived, and how might this be articulated through my practice-led research?
- Be artistically articulated through the creative processes involving printmaking, photography, archives and ceramics?

This exegesis will outline my creative processes, philosophical explorations and methodology as I attempt to explore and develop explanations for the questions above.

The location of my visual arts research is the Western Desert, specifically Wongawol Station, which is situated 244 kilometres east of Wiluna, WA. Although I have taken a mixed media approach to the creative process, printmaking processes provide a prime emphasis—particularly copper etching plates, which combine the strength of the earth's metals and the possibilities of fineness of line through scratching: essentially, this is a form of map making. I see the scratched line as a metaphor for the nature of the desert environment—enduring and powerful, nurturing and treacherous to humans, and environmentally fragile. I have also combined photolithography in a reworking of archival images, as well as ceramics as

an immersive process embodying the shapes of artefacts, which was initially a response to not being able to sight actual artefacts.

The significance of printmaking in relation to my project is conveyed by its long history and its power to affect “social and political change” (Uhlmann, 2019, p. 37), and as a vehicle of knowledge. Printing processes are alchemic in nature, whereby ordinary “materials are transformed” (Uhlmann, 2019, p. 37) into higher forms of their individual components through an acute embodied process. While printing processes are inextricably “woven into the fabric of civil society” (Beardmore, 2019, p. 31) and seen as an ancient form of communication, I intended to use them as a way of metaphorically writing on the land to discover what would be revealed in response to my immersive engagement with the environment. Equally, I intended to explore how the land would influence and inform the outcomes of my printmaking. Kiefer’s hand in printmaking is powerful and unmasked in his intention to arrive at truth: the truth of history and of the shame and violence perpetrated against the victims and survivors of the holocaust. Although, in printmaking, I have a much lighter hand than Kiefer, his approach at times strongly informed my tactility decisions and continues to provide ongoing impetus to tell of the violence and historical narratives through the potentiality of his injurious, ghostly and menacing lines.

The delicate nature of my practice-led research techniques is partly informed by the lightness of touch exemplified by the work of Kiki Smith (as cited in Fremont, 2014), a printmaker, ceramicist and mixed media artist whose work concerns notions of self and universe through her nuanced exploration of line and form. The utilisation of printmaking practices and techniques enabled the phenomenon of the power of repetition to be explored. Smith believed that printmaking mimicked human life in that “we are all the same and yet everyone is different” (as cited in Weitman, 2003, p. 2). She experimented with the notions of uniqueness versus repetition, the latter being intimately connected with printmaking and the printed form. Smith felt that there was a degree of distance created, or a sense of being removed by the printed line, which she liked to combine with the intimacy of her other craft and art work (as cited in Weitman, 2003). The ability to take elements from one printed work and use them in another appealed to her (as cite in Weitman, 2003), as did the possibilities of layering,

which she felt was a process that could lead to new directions and new meanings. Of most relevance to my research is the transformative power of repetition, since repetition in the act of making is mirrored in the act of walking, whereby rhythmic motion can lead to a heightened awareness of one's surroundings.

My research highlights the importance of line in terms of the trace one creates or leaves by passing through place and how this is represented in the line I create by etching the copper plates, which, in turn, became a kind of map making. I explore these concepts by looking at artists such as Coldwell (Thomas, 2017), whose body becomes the line in his artwork, thus becoming the instrument of discovery or investigation, and also Twombly, whose work could be described as a philosophy of line in that it hovers "between language and image" (Share, 2011, p. 2). Archives also became an important part of my research for two reasons: official documents were highly restricted and held in government departments; and artefacts, which I needed to connect with, were almost impossible to view in real life as they are mostly housed in museum boxes and storerooms. Consequently, archival images of artefacts became significant, and in this regard the work of Brook Andrew (2008) was useful in the way he reclaims and reworks archival images from an Aboriginal viewpoint.

My research was guided by the ideas of phenomenologists such as Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2012), who believe that the body and the world cannot be separated. Merleau-Ponty (2012) proposes that the body is the primary place of knowing the world, and that the human body and the world are existentially entwined in a constant elaborating consciousness of subjectivity giving meaning to the minutiae of relationships between everything: "my body as a system of possible actions, a virtual body whose phenomenal 'place' is defined by its task and its situation" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 260). Essentially, phenomenology is the study of "essences of perception [and] consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii) and of how we can arrive at a semblance of understanding. As a philosophy, it presents a way of dealing with the notions of time and space and how we live within them in the world; for instance, one's precarious "hold on the past" and the future is dependent upon "fully understanding [yourself], but that moment can never arrive since it would again be a moment, bordered by the horizon of a future" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 362).

Hence, owing to the nature of my enquiry, ideas of phenomenology and its relevance are referenced because I developed my methodology throughout the project via the act of walking.

I further explore the experiential embodiment of walking through the lens of rhythmanalysis [2] (Chen, 2013), with an emphasis on the concepts of absence/presence and how walking integrates the past and present of vanishing worlds through retracing memories and embodied practice. Since I also recognise the importance of script in my creative response, I attempt to use the non-binary philosophy of Derrida to conceptualise body/subject, object and his concepts of absence/presence (Bell, 2014). In this regard, examining perceptions of time, space and place are inescapable. As examples, I explore writers, theorists, artists and filmmakers who have used walking to express and synthesise their ideas to explain, jolt, politicise and reveal new narratives and meanings. Examples include the structural film techniques of William Raban's (as cited in Chen, 2013) *Fergus Walking*, which experiments with time, place/space; printmaker Paul Coldwell (Thomas, 2017), who works from an existential point of view; and the poet Nandi Chinna (2014), who re-scripts vanishing wetlands through her embodied practice of walking and poetry.

WALKING, EMBODIMENT, TIME AND SPACE

At a biological level, walking is placing one foot in front of the other, engendering an ambulatory rhythmic complexity of movements. The singularity of such movements involves a continuing "reformulation and negotiation with the surrounding material agents" (Chen, 2013, p. 532). Sensorial indicators of the body interpret spaces and surfaces, feeding back to the brain, resulting in the formulation of perceptions, which then determine how the body interacts with the surroundings. Chinna (2014) conjures Galileo's pendulum when she writes "legs move through time and space, marking the movement over grass, stones, hills, and through wind which is air moving through space" (p. 8). Chinna (2014) believes that walking as action, "reintroduces the body as a fundamental definer of experience" (p. 8). French philosopher Michel de Certeau (2008), who authored *Walking in the City*, infers that

the subjective use of a city by walkers creates the “text of the city” (p. 156), thereby creating meaning. He describes the personification of urban space when he states the “city has its own rhetoric” (2008, p. 156).

The syncopation of rhythmic movements by people in relation to material objects manifests in many ways and is seen to be a powerful learning tool in understanding cultures. The body as one with the environment is reflected in the views of philosophers such as Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2012), who believe that the body and the world are symbiotically and intrinsically linked. As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty (2012) purports that knowing the world is primarily sourced through the body, that the existential relationship between the body and the world is in constant motion in an unfolding of subjectively negotiating the iota of everything to find meaning. de Certeau (2008) creates a poetry of walking that has its roots in the non-binary phenomenological ideas of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Though de Certeau writes of the city, his work is highly pertinent to my exploration of walking as knowing. He writes that walkers generate a kinaesthetic quality and with each step a mass of singularities are created, which is what “makes up the city” (de Certeau, 2008, p. 155). He describes walking as an enunciation, a declaration or special enactment of place. The body weaves, skips and links by the simple act of walking, which interrupts and fragments space, thereby transforming that space, and text is written upon it (de Certeau, 2008).

Gaston Bachelard’s (1964) notion of muscular consciousness conveys the idea that as people walk the differing but repetitive terrains in everyday life, a body memory is incorporated into their physicality and sensorial capacities that is imprinted by textures, smells, contours and seasonal changes in their surroundings. These sensorial imprints are anticipated and retrieved in the future (Bachelard, 1964), which can be described as forward movement informed by thousands of nuanced spatial and sensorial negotiations through time and space via the act of walking. Carter (2009, as cited in Chen, 2013) argues that “rhythm is the formalisation of eido-kinetic [3] intuition, organizing the chance marks we make on the world into memorable pattern” (p. 534). Chen (2013), in her analysis of walking in the East End of London, reinforces this idea when she infers that “the peripatetic being can no longer be considered as a

solitary walking figure enclosed in private thoughts. A whole world of historical thing-relations participates in the making of one's walking rhythms" (p. 534).

Chinna (2014) asks, "How many footsteps will it take to walk a place into the body?" (p. 16). These words place the body in time and space—cutting through space, leaving traces, creating imagined and real lines that become perceptions, memories, stories, *mappa mundi* [4]. Walking becomes a relationship, a negotiation between the human body and place characterised by a vast amount of sensory information about the features of place and the body's responses, decisions and actions. Husserl (as cited in Behnke, 2011) talks of experienced embodiment, which alludes to the phenomenological notion of the body being part of a "deeper structure and all knowing" (p. 1). Walking and how we perceive the world is viewed as a phenomenological experience in which subject and object cannot be separated. This notion of the human body subconsciously creating its own reality, or perceived reality, by the sum of bundled stimuli triggering both conscious and subconscious tangibles or abstractions in the mind as the body glides, negotiates and navigates its own human-constructed spaces, leads to making meaning.

Walking, for de Certeau (2008), is equated with the same emotional powers that language has in relation to culture, the same stylistic nuances. He calls walking a "long poem [that] manipulates spatial organization" (p. 156). In the vertical canyon-like structures of the city, de Certeau (2008) refers to the walkers below as the "ordinary practitioners [who] follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it" (p. 150). Likewise, for Chinna (2014), walking defines the body as the sensory vessel that can experience the dimensions of told and untold narratives of life on earth. She believes that poetry clears a space for contemplation, for imminence in which the tangible and intangible can be explored. She is aware of the contours when her foot touches the ground, the lines and traces made when she glides through space, since "walking through space [is the equivalent to walking through] time and history" (Chinna, 2014, p. 12). Merleau-Ponty (1962) alludes to this concept when he describes the ongoing becoming of things and how the partiality of perceptions can constitute one's reality, which is gleaned from fragments, sketches, adumbrations of "colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xi) as each

object reflects the other. The ever moving, indeterminate perception of things shifts the body towards integration with the environment, which is deemed necessary for a deeper understanding of the body in relation to space.

IDEAS OF ABSENCE/PRESENCE

I come from a deep place of unknowing, an absence of my own history, of my mother's history and of many generations before her. The staggering void is almost too great to comprehend as one grapples with the reasons and searches for clues to navigate a trail into the emptiness. The innate knowledge that somehow the stories were contained within me propelled me forward with the confidence of knowing that by being in the place of my ancestors the stories would start to emerge, that somehow my presence there represented the past and present simultaneously, and that these concepts were on the same continuum and all I had to do was open myself to the possibilities. Once there, I started with the earth, rocks, the sounds of the birds and then explored archival images, anecdotal stories and script on the walls of the homestead. Faint threads began to form as I tried hard to imagine the movements of my people over the very piece of earth on which I was standing. The intangible nature of a trace within me was being as finely formed as a piece of gossamer from a time unknown.

The concepts of absence/presence within language/text, time and space are captured by Derrida's (as cited in Bell, 2014) ideas informed by his deconstructionism and non-binary phenomenology. Derrida draws heavily on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of Being as always "already there" (p. vii) to expand his ideas. Essentially, this notion contains implicit innateness of one's being existing before conscious thought before any constructed reality and therefore in union with the universe (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Heidegger (1962) also questions the accepted theories attributed to notions of presence by purporting that an element of Being is throwing forward "where being can only go forward" (Bell, 2014, p. 2). This resonates with theories on rhythmanalysis, whereby the singularities of masses of nuanced relations composed by body and environment create a state of forward movement and continual becoming.

Essentially, Derrida (as cited in Bell, 2014) is concerned with disrupting accepted literary and philosophical dichotomies that signified a world of binary interpretations. Intrinsic to Derrida's exploration of absence/presence is the concept of trace (Derrida, 1976). The French interpretation of trace in this context is close to the meaning of sign, although Derrida (1976) deliberately avoids strict definitions to counter any assumptions. Derrida (1976) argues that presence of a thing is not felt through a sign, but through the absence of presence, which is then calculated to the nearest perceived approximation of a previous experience. For Derrida (1973), "language is a play of identity and difference, an endless chain of signifiers leading to other signifiers" (p. 141). Within the meanings of words are contradictions. There are no steadfast meanings because all meaning is deemed constructed. The playfulness of language with its loopholes, fusion, lack of boundaries and absence is gleaned by the trace and therefore its becoming presence—before or after its becoming absence.

According to Derrida (2008), "the trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself" (p. 144). He argues trace is not linear or chronological but a *bricolage* [5], a continual unfolding or making, which for Derrida is the interweaving of text that is only "produced in the transformation of another text" (Derrida, 1981, p. 416). Essentially, trace can be described as the non-meaning that arises when looking at the meaning of another word—a bricolage of continual interweaving or endless chain where language (logos) [6] is steeped in the world of metaphysics and existentialism (Derrida, 1981). Derrida states, "there is nothing outside the text" (1976, p. 158), which is essentially claiming there is no outside text. Representations are limiting and "without an outside of language, meaning can never be completely present" (Derrida, 1976, p. 158). In this regard, binary distinctions are lost, as absence and presence are part of the same phenomena where signification and essence can only be gleaned by the trace, and absence and presence are essentially moments within themselves.

IMMERSIVE TECHNIQUES

With notions of absence/presence in mind, it is interesting to examine the works of filmmaker William Raban (2013), *Fergus Walking*, poet Nandi Chinna, (2014), *Swamp: Walking the Wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain* and printmaker, Coldwell. Chinna conjures a vanished system of wetlands through the rendering of rhythmanalysis, walking and poetics, while Raban attempts to portray a non-binary representation of walking within disrupted notions of time and space (Chen, 2013). In contrast, Coldwell's (2011) prints and sculptures are more concerned with an invisible psychology of a person within the universe who is engaged in a kind of personal searching. Coldwell places himself at the centre of his exploration into existential phenomenology, which results in an illusory rendering of his art practice (Thomas, 2017), while Raban and Chinna reveal the minutiae of walking through filmmaking techniques and poetry, respectively, leading to a symbiosis of meaning through the weaving of moving image and text.

Coldwell's "traces" (Thomas, 2017, p. 3), manifested by touches of paint and digitally generated photographic halftone dots, signify a breaking down of elements into atomic-like pieces. He, as the artist, is on a journey, walking and mapping / mapping and walking, and his prints, a combination of layering, scanning and drawing, signify the stopping off points like the (gossamer) thread of a spider's web. The meanings are elusive, the narratives continually morphing with the movement of the body in space, resembling Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological concept of "being-in-the-world" (p. xiv). Coldwell weaves ancient and contemporary techniques together, resulting in layered images through adding and subtracting, thereby creating equivalent meanings of absence and presence relating to daily life.

For artists such as Coldwell, the exploration of surfaces follows the Heideggerian notion of becoming one. Script, earth, skin and that which is created out of the fusion of all these mirror the phenomenological experience of immersive embodied practice. Essentially, walking re-engages the body with the environment in an existential relationship. Coldwell's work encapsulates the allusiveness and ambiguities of life, which visually challenge accepted codes of perception. However, it

is not the image that is at the core of his work but Coldwell's own body gliding through space, making images, tracing lines, melting metal—his sensory navigations, relationships with space and place in time, which create new and transient meanings, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

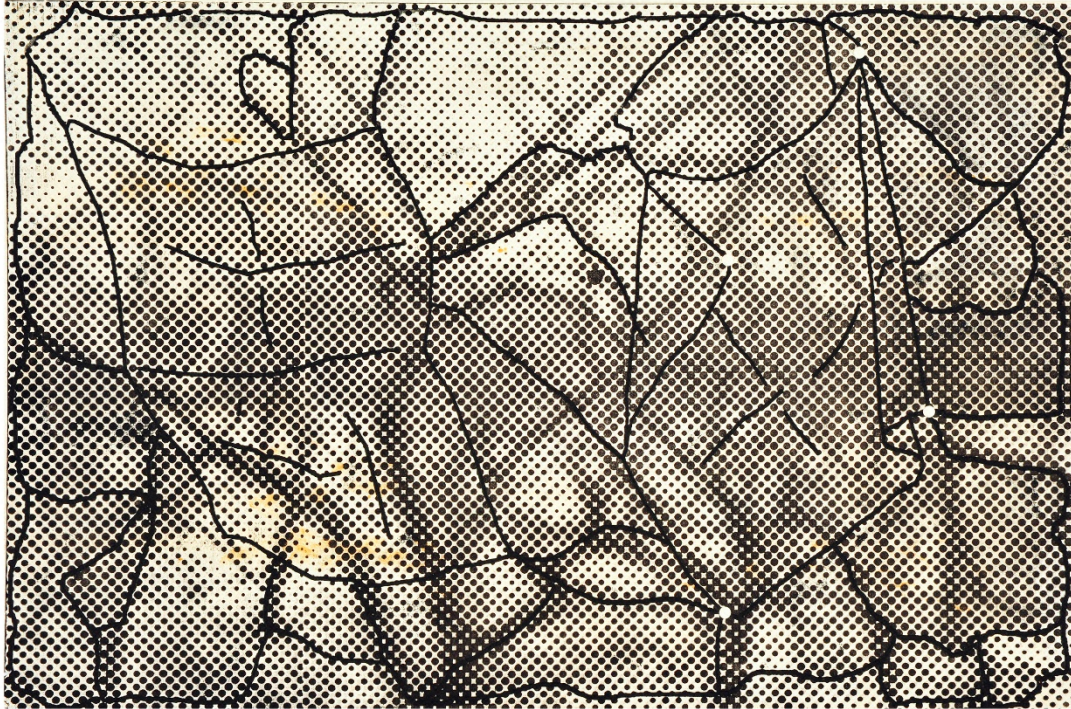


Figure 1. Paul Coldwell (2011), *Canopy 1*, laser woodcut, 76 x 56 cm.

Note: Copyright 2011 by Paul Coldwell. Reprinted with permission.

Raban (1978) heightens rhythm analysis perceptions with his structural [7] film *Fergus Walking* by using unusual film techniques to disrupt the viewer's habitual seeing. Set in a street in London's East End, Raban juxtaposes Fergus walking as seen through the window frame of a moving vehicle against a red brick urban setting. By utilising a "shifting order of perceptual relationships" (Chen, 2013, p. 536), Raban succeeds in estranging the viewer from anticipated spatial-temporal sensations, which relates to Derrida's ideas of moving forward or of absence/presence lacking distinctive qualities but instead being of the same source (Bell, 2014). As "the orchestrations of the street are interposed with that of the moving vehicle" (Chen, 2013, p. 536), the viewer becomes puzzled about the positioning of things and is unable to reconcile

coded perceptions with the scene before them. Raban's use of film is not intended to tell others how to live but, rather, it concerns "showing how something takes on meaning" (Chen, 2013, p. 538) through a heightened awareness of the interrelationships that continually unfold.

Essentially, *Fergus Walking* is an aesthetic artwork that imprints upon the senses of the viewer, thereby imparting to the ordinary new significance that questions notions of habitually perceived ideas of absence/presence in relation to time and space. Likewise, Chinna (2014) moves beyond the binary of ideas via a re-scripting of the vanishing wetlands through an embodied experience of walking, which conjures poetic text as her ambulating body fuses with the surroundings where there was once a vast system of wetlands. Chinna's words encompass the abstract and the tangible; notions of past and present merge, become fragmented, disrupted—detectable only by the trace of meanings that is given to words. The poet's embodied intention slows time to the stillness of a breath (Chinna, 2014), the body becomes a matrix that potentially experiences the told and untold narratives of life (Chinna, 2014). Mirroring Derrida's non-binary ideas of absence/presence, poetry can be "illuminating yet cast its own shadows" (Chinna, 2014, p. 10). The search for meaning in the metaphorical clearings of poetry offers a deeper perspective on the human condition, which seems to be an insatiable human quest. For Chinna (2014), walking leads to the making of poetic text.

It seems an examination of rhythm analysis provides a microscopic view into the abstract nature of human existence. By studying the minutiae of footsteps, body movements, and the masses of singular navigations and physical negotiations in relation to tangible objects of social structures, patterns emerge; traces of past and present become visible to the human eye and human consciousness. The structural film *Fergus Walking* (Raban, 1978) denies the viewer familiar identification or perceived anticipation of the walker and instead brings inanimate objects to the foreground, such as the street sign and brick wall, thereby presenting the complexity of rhythmic relations, which begs for a striking new awareness. Raban (1978) disrupts coded concepts of time and space reflective of Derrida's non-binary view of the world in which absence/presence are on the same continuum.

Reflecting on printmaker Coldwell's work in relation to rhythmanalysis reveals his journey into existentialism where the step-by-step movement of Coldwell's own body during the making of his art traces or maps an illusory invocation of membrane surfaces, both physical and metaphorical, and how they interplay with the other. Coldwell's scrambled constellation star-like prints interrupt notions of past and present. Through his transparent layering, or traces of psychological thoughts and feelings of absences, he creates a montage of a hard copy of presence, which in turn reflects absence again. Chinna's (2014) *Swamp: Walking the wetlands of the Swan River Coastal Plain*, completely embodies the intricate weavings of rhythmanalysis through her embodied walking of the once existent wetlands and the spiritual invocation of her poetry as she walks. The corrupted hydrology of the earth still bubbles beneath the massive cement of the city; Chinna's words bring forth their existence, which over time have fallen from the consciousness of the city's inhabitants. An examination of rhythmanalysis in relation to the three artists discussed above highlights ways in which a significant shift in human perceptions can lead to new meanings, new narratives and, importantly, new knowledge into the human condition and our relation to the planet.

A NOTE ON ARCHIVES

Archives are like a footprint, or a fingerprint signifying identity, a trace of truth, providing the inherent attributes of the archive are correct. However, Foucault (1982) writes that archives are engaged in constant struggle with the power groups who continue to define culture and society or the situation at hand. Often, archives are held by the state and are governed by regulations, which can be problematic in terms of access and availability. Paradoxically, the archive is imbued with a sense of authority, giving it legitimacy and rigour. Researching and analysing the archive, therefore, necessarily exposes the power domination between those being archived and those creating the archive, which in turn potentially gives the voiceless a voice. Nowhere is this more vital and important than with the Australian Aboriginal people who have sustained a faceless theft of spirituality, culture and land since the beginning of colonisation.

Efforts to uncover Aboriginal archives both here and around the globe seem to be gathering momentum, with some curious situations coming to light. For example, the Vatican Museum *Anima Mundi* has an impressive collection of Aboriginal artefacts dating back to the 1800s, even though it was not historically very active in collecting such items. The collection is the result of two specific events: the establishment of New Norcia Monastery in WA in 1847 by two Benedictine monks and the great year-long exhibition held by the Vatican in 1925 to celebrate and share the knowledge of different spiritual cultures from around the world (Aigner, 2017). Many exhibition items were returned to the world's tribal communities; some were gifted to the Pope, and, in the case of Aboriginal Australia, a core representation of items was retained by the Vatican and remains as part of its current collection. A recent collaboration between the Vatican Museum and Indigenous communities has resulted in an ongoing effort to determine custodianship of the items plus catalogue and display them as a valued part of the Vatican collection.

Some objects worth highlighting that embody a high degree of cultural significance include the Creation Song Cycle painted on pieces of stone depicting the Wanjina figure from the Kimberley area, where the Benedictine monks also spread their teachings, and the powerful burial poles from the Tiwi Islands. Both items invoke deep intergenerational connections between the current Aboriginal custodians and their ancestral makers. An important piece sent early on from New Norcia to the Vatican is a three-part sculpted figure of red ochre, which the Benedictine monks say was a traded object from a distant tribe. Red ochre, characterised by its metallic sheen, was thought to have been highly prized and traded over vast distances for important ceremonial rituals and, according to the obscure inventory authored by the monks, this piece belonged to a ceremonial site where rituals were performed (Aigner, 2017). Unfortunately, specific details of the maker and its cultural context were not recorded, but the little information available enables research to begin in collaboration with present day custodians that potentially may reveal the rituals practised and the extent of nomadic life, trading routes and migratory patterns.

Issues of origin and provenance concerning Aboriginal artefacts is fraught with seemingly insurmountable problems. The Australian Indigenous people were

conquered, practically destroyed and humiliated, and they had every part of their existence as they knew it appropriated without proper care of the unfolding fate of their ancient living culture in distress. In the face of land acquisition by the colonists, systematic arsenic poisoning and fences restricting the traditional nomadic way of life, the Benedictine monks of New Norcia intended to provide a haven from the incomprehensible harsh realities besetting the Aboriginal population. Considered a frontier when the monks arrived to establish their community, it is thought that the monks shared the Aboriginal way of life initially, moving about with the seasonal availability of food. According to Aigner's (2017) account, the monks, in their overarching purpose of helping the transition from tribal life to a sedentary one, cared about the Aboriginal people and were interested in their culture and spirituality. As part of their reported interest, they collected artefacts, sending them back to the Vatican, and attempted to describe cultural practices and record language.

The importance of this cannot be overstated, as it was a time when most of the colonising European population held notions that Aborigines were 'savages' (Lawson, 2015, p. 9). Artefacts would have been widely exchanged and acquired with little or no regard for provenance or cultural context by the wider community. The Vatican collection provides us with a fingerprint of Aboriginal life in its pre-colonial state on first contact with Western values and practices. For instance, one of the monks describes how the Aboriginal hunter sets fire at night to one end of the boomerang before throwing it: "What a beautiful sight it is, this bright spot in the sky wrapping itself in thousands of small circles and bursts of sparks" (Aigner, 2017, p. 50). The eventual consequence of being assimilated into a sedentary way of life at the New Norcia monastic community meant that the tribal way of life greatly diminished, as did the creation of tribal artefacts. In this sense, the same significance should be attached to the Vatican collection as to that of an archaeological dig of an ancient culture.

In 1978, I studied anthropology at the University of Western Australia. Regrettably, I did not take any Aboriginal studies, but I would see Professor Berndt and his wife Catherine Berndt walking within and outside the Anthropology Department in single file. It was said that they lived according to many of the Aboriginal ways and that walking in single file, the male first and then the female, was one of these. A year

before, the Berndts had donated to the department Aboriginal artefacts that they had collected on their many fieldtrips. Some of the collection was displayed in glass cases in a dedicated space, the Berndt Museum, which was essentially the basement of the Anthropology Department. I would frequently visit this space to view the items, not knowing the significance the collection would have for me decades later. On each occasion of my visits I was the only person there. The objects were beautiful, mesmerising, only to be packed away when the collection was put under the management of another department within the university. For many years, the collection has not been seen, relegated to storage boxes and racks below the Lawrence Wilson Gallery.

Controversy surrounds the Berndt collection, which I can only touch on here because increasingly over the years a minefield of research has developed regarding protocols and cultural considerations concerning Indigenous rights and archives. The Berndts began anthropological fieldtrips into Aboriginal communities in the 1920s. They belonged to an inaugural and select few field anthropologists who came out of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1925 (Conway & Philp, 2008). From its inception, the department was based on the British model of participant-observation, or 'fieldwork', for collecting data and cultural material (artefacts). The department was exclusive, small and extremely powerful in terms of the information collected and disseminated. Fieldwork expeditions were funded by the Australian National Research Council (ANRC) and it was contractually agreed that any cultural material collected would belong to the ANRC, although the anthropologist had discretion to collect a replica of an item to keep for him or herself but was prohibited from selling it (Gray, 2019). Anthropologists had to provide assurances that they were not collectors themselves—an area that was extremely confusing and impossible to control.

Ronald Berndt's father, a jeweller, was in fact an avid collector of Aboriginal artefacts, and it is hard to imagine that his son was not influenced by this. The issue of ownership of cultural material came to a head when twice the Berndt collection came under the threat of redistribution: once because of an incoming professor at the University of Sydney and again when the ANRC was replaced by the Academy of

Science. Professor Berndt strongly asserted ownership over the collection, citing reasons of ongoing research and teaching purposes at the University of Western Australia (Conway & Philp, 2008). In short, Professor Berndt managed to procure part of the collection to be housed in the Anthropology Department at the University of Western Australia, but the episode highlighted questions of ownership long before today's complicated concerns of custodianship and Indigenous rights. In the 1920s, the only questions concerned whether ownership resided with the collector, the institution housing the collection or the funding body.

Gray (2019) importantly emphasises the act or processes of collecting cultural objects and says that rarely have we received comprehensive and detailed information of the moment of collections or methods of acquisition of objects. Those, like the Berndts, who were sponsored by the ANRC, often described events in their field notes or in personal correspondence, which were sometimes lost or deliberately destroyed. However, in the case of the Berndts' field notes, there is a 30-year embargo on their release stipulated in Catherine Berndt's will (since she died after her husband), making them legally available in 2024. This secret field note document is 37,000 pages long (Mayam, 2018) and is highly contentious, not least for the reasons for such an embargo. Mayam writes that the source of Berndt's decision may have been a deep distrust of all governments in the face of forced mining acquisitions, native title claims and sacred site disputes, which the Berndts described as outright government hostility towards, and very little interest in, a prehistoric culture (Mayam, 2018).

The forbidden notes represent an academic treasure trove as well as a mass of potential problems concerning issues of Indigenous rights. Who owns the Indigenous story and how were the artefacts acquired? Typically, ethnographic material was acquired through the exchange of tea, flour, sugar or predominantly tobacco. The Berndts also exchanged pieces of clothing and arranged for artefacts to be specially made (Gray, 2019). The appropriateness of such exchanges in today's thinking is extremely problematic and one wonders how the field notes will be received and critiqued when finally released. Again, however, like the Vatican collection, the Berndt notes will reveal a fingerprint, a trace of Aboriginal tribal cultures that have been historically exposed to systematic erasure rather than to honouring and celebration.

The Berndts concentrated on the aesthetics of Aboriginal culture, believing that here lay the stories of thousands of years of culture. A metaphor for all times is contained within a sacred artefact the Berndts collected (now housed somewhere in the Berndt Museum) during their expedition to Arnhem Land. The sacred dilly bag, a symbolic uterus, represents the Djanggawul Creation Song Cycle: the daughters of the sun or two sisters endowed with life-giving properties travel from the rising sun's eastward direction across the Gulf of Carpentaria. Contained within the dilly bag were totemic emblems signifying plants, animals and trees. Long string was attached to the sides of the dilly bag with feathers from the lindaridji parakeet; these represented the umbilical cord and rays of the sun. When the sisters of the Djanggawul came and hung their dilly bags filled with sacred emblems on the shelter so they could hunt among the mangroves, their brother and his male friends (who were created by the sisters) stole the baskets. The sisters were warned that something was wrong by the djunmal mangrove bird. The men had stolen the songs, sacred emblems and power to perform sacred rituals. The sisters were afraid of the power of the men's songs, and the elder sister said, 'Men can do it now, they can look after it ... We know everything. We have really lost nothing, because we remember it all, and we can let them have their small part. Aren't we still sacred, even if we have lost the baskets?' (Berndt & Berndt, 1964, p. 216).

The importance of archives became apparent as my research unfolded, and I found that recorded history of Wongawol was virtually non-existent before the 1950s. I had received some information via a family file from the Department of Indigenous Affairs, WA [8] regarding my family's forced removal from Wongawol but little else. There were a few names, dates and places, a few police witness statements but the information was questionable because it had been recorded by white officials and the Aboriginal people involved had signed documents with an X, which tends to throw the validity and accuracy of the documents into immediate doubt. Early family photographs of Wongawol became an important source of information and, upon numerous close examinations over a period of three years, I started to see potential links.

A wide search for early archival images of Aboriginal people in the Western Desert was initially prompted by not being able to find artefacts in museums but was also spurred on by my need to learn about Western Desert culture. Subsequently, turning some of these digitised images into hard copies, I then produced high contrast laser photocopies on office paper. The toner acts as a transfer with the aid of a printing roller, ink and plate oil to dilute the consistency of the printing ink, gum Arabic and water. The vanishing effect of the photolithographic technique that I rendered to these archival images mirrored the elements of Aboriginal experience in this country to the absence regarding their ancestral families, culture and dignity. The handling of these images imbued a kind of sacredness, an honouring of anonymous individuals in the images where only place has been signified. The effect of incomplete and faint ink traces invoked ghostly blurring and lines that suggested something tangible but also potentially highlighted generations of unknowing.

I am reminded of Derrida's concepts of absence and presence, whereby these terms are seen on the same continuum; that is, presence contains absence and absence contains presence (Derrida, 2008). The repetitive use of the Xeroxed images, the disruption and damage caused to the surface of the paper by the ink roller, gum Arabic and water presents a changing form to which I began to relate. Through seeing and artistic manipulation of the images, a relationship to the figures in the image starts to unfold. Attention becomes focused on the contours of their faces, bodies, what they are doing in relation to their environment, traditional body scarring, adornments and the lyrical movements of their limbs while going about their everyday activities. The people in these archival images were part of a belonging that a camera cannot capture in a frozen moment. They belonged to the land and they belonged to a kinship group that was highly complex. However, through repetitive editions of photolithographic prints a thread can be picked up and a narrative can begin to emerge.

SEEING THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS—BROOK ANDREW

Brook Andrew is a descendent of the Wiradjuri tribe of SE Australia and is also of Irish and Scottish heritage. His use of the archive in his praxis extends beyond the

usual metaphorical archaeological dig. His intention is to release events from the known histories and the prevailing belief systems, of both the past and the present. He recognises that the denial of alternative perceptions (histories) of events and archival objects is a denial of the voices belonging to these events and objects, and he seeks to subvert the accepted histories by manipulating the archives themselves (Andrew, 2018).

The relevance for my own practice-led research is that I began utilising archival photographs of predominantly Western Desert people as an immersive process and an attempt to uncover the histories and events of my area of research, Wongawol. My experience in the field of photography collided with a recent new-found skill in photolithography, which has led me to use the archival photograph. My method of taking a photograph of the computer-generated archival image with a camera results in the pixilation or halftone dot effect, which is essentially the first stage of manipulation, or 'disappearing' of the inherent depictions and interpretations. The original image is generally presented with little description and the people are often not identified by name, allowing for curiosity and reinterpretation. Even copyright is unclear, a field that requires rigorous research.

In exploring the usefulness of Andrew's methods in relation to my own work, I examined his piece housed in the Art Gallery of Western Australia called *Australia IV*. It is one of a series of six large-scale works, which are a re-representation of a Gustav Mutzel etching commissioned by the naturalist William Blandowski after his 1854 expedition to explore the cultural practices of Aboriginal people (Andrew, 2010). Strangely, Mutzel never visited Australia; his etchings were composed using the illustrated works of Blandowski. As a result, the etchings were imbued with a double dose of European sensibility and interpretation.

Andrew's work comprises mixed media on Belgian linen silkscreen with gold foil. He deliberately works on a large scale (2.5 m x 3 m) to accentuate the fantastical curiosity about Indigenous cultures experienced by Europeans and uses camouflage foil to evoke the romantic notions attached to these cultures and the magic attributed to them. The scale of the works also mirrors Western history paintings, which are

designed to be larger than life and awe-inspiring (Andrew, 2010). These simple methods disrupt and re-contextualise the original works. It is a kind of throwing back, a mirroring by the European culture of itself, and a questioning of the gaze. Who is looking at whom?

According to the inscription next to the painting, Andrew describes his work as “fantasy, drama and an explorer’s view of Aboriginal life away from the British colonies” (Andrew, 2013). The scene depicts an early recorded encounter with the rituals of Aboriginal culture during which water spirits are being invoked to drive away the evil spirits of sickness. It is more than probable that the onlookers would have had little understanding of the rituals practised, and one can probably assume that such encounters were viewed through a mainly Western lens.



Figure 2a. Brook Andrew (2013), *Australia IV*, mixed media on Belgian linen silkscreen, gold foil, 200 x 300 cm.

Note: Copyright 2013 by Brook Andrew. Reprinted with permission.

Andrew’s work is a layered reclaiming of Aboriginal stories, a confiscation of original images and a reworking of them to erase and to add, to magnify and then to

demystify. Paradoxically, he is also an explorer who also renders the work in magical, fantastical ways. The difference being that he invites the viewer to enter a world of imagination, not a glass specimen case with empirical descriptions.

On this point, Andrew's reworking of archival images also plays with reality, since it would be difficult to know the true meanings and choreographic nature of the rituals that occurred under the gaze of the first explorers and before this time in Australian history. His iterations are perhaps an approximation, an imagined sequence, because we only have the recordings of European explorers and naturalists. What we have is a mixed up, tattered trace of memories that were originally communicated through very complex systems of language, song and dance that, again, the Europeans did not have the sensibility, knowledge or vocabulary to understand.

Andrew's point of resonance for me is this reworking, re-scoring, reclaiming and re-imagined time through art, through making, as I trust that something is revealed during this alchemic process. The expectation is that somehow a thread of an event, narrative or object will show itself and speak the truth of history, that it can be picked up and traced back and back to reveal a whole people before the clash of cultures, when one culture was systematically demoralised, dispossessed and almost erased.

I have little to go on. The geographical area of my research had very few early explorers because of its remoteness and harsh environment. I have yet to find a comprehensive account of the migration of the tribes in the Western Desert area. Existence was extremely tenuous with the availability of food sources and water being the main concern. Of the time before the pastoral station was founded in 1902, there is scant information. The use of archival photographs is an entry point for me that allows a visualisation of the life at the time of contact with Europeans. It tells me something about the way they lived.

Like Andrew, I utilise a layering process of the photographs. The selection of image is important because the aesthetics must have a lure for it to be successful. In this regard, Andrew's work can be, and is often characterised as, dramatic, romantic and captivating. But perhaps it must be to capture the interest of the viewer. Andrew's

artistry is in “uncoiling forgotten histories back into conscious perception” (Heckenberg, 2014, p. 2). His transformative processes of the archival image are to use shimmering techniques, to layer fragile surfaces, to peel back and to accentuate so that the viewer’s gaze is disrupted. Seriousness is coupled with playfulness and there is a concerted attempt at ambiguity (Heckenberg, 2014).

Andrew’s methods of working are useful for me to research in even more detail since my own use of archival images developed in ways that I did not predict. What has come to the fore is the concept of ‘disappearance’ in the methods I employ. The build up to the process of photolithography requires positive actions and plenty of layering in creating the image to be worked. Then the process is a physical form of breaking down using gum Arabic, water and printing inks.

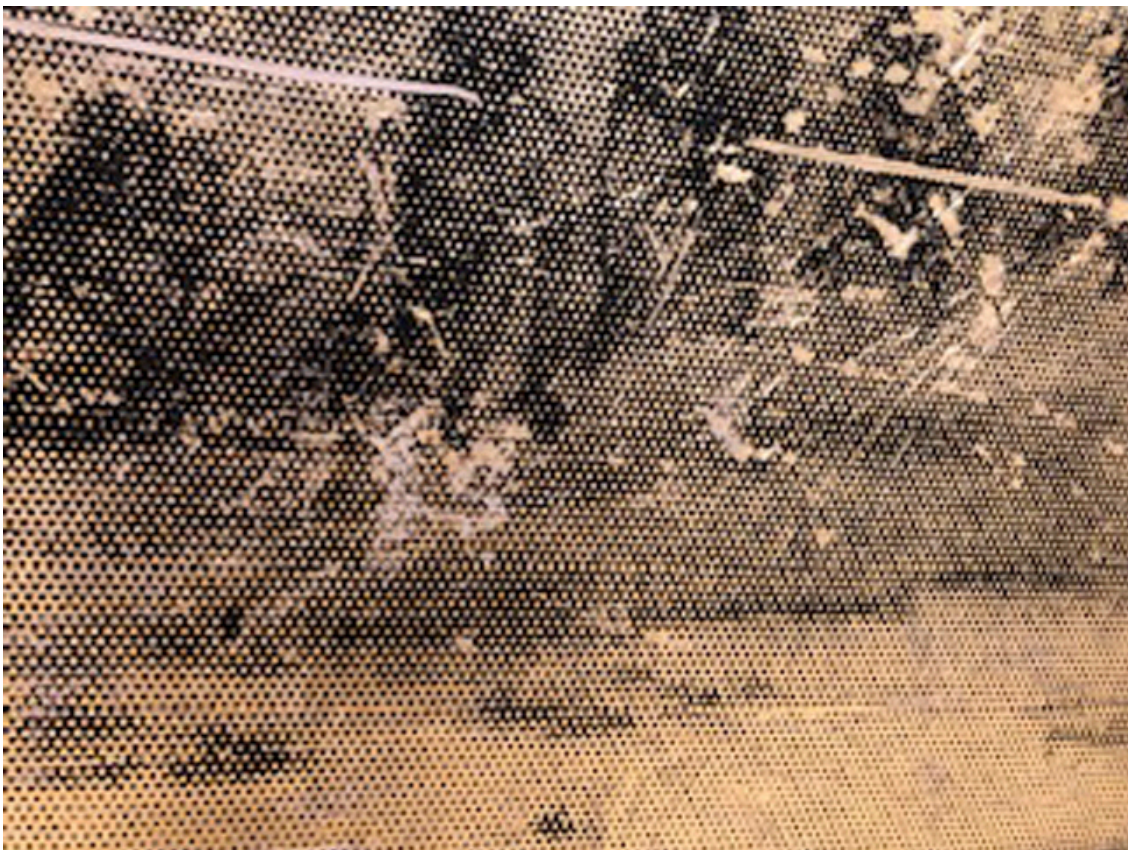


Figure 2b. Brook Andrew (2013), *Australia IV* (detail), mixed media on Belgian linen silkscreen, gold foil, 200 x 300 cm.

Note: Copyright 2013 by Brook Andrew. Reprinted with permission.

The photographic image being transformed is on fragile paper and can be reused for as long as the paper stays sufficiently intact. The action of the ink roller, water and gum Arabic creates a violence to the paper. This is reflective of the historical violence to the subjects in the image. The roller, or my touch, does not pick up all the information on the transferable image so there is a process of 'disappearance' that is unfolding or not unfolding, which again reflects the lack of traces I can find in my area of research. Like Andrew, I find that I am adopting processes of destroying images laden with a set of perceptions and reworking them. Andrew is essentially attempting to awaken the collective conscience to tell alternative stories of the voiceless. I am trying to find some of the stories.

TACTILE SENSATIONS—ANSELM KIEFER

Kiefer employs palpable tension in his paintings and printmaking, which is often the result of combining competing materials in a single work or fighting against the grain of wood in the case of his woodcuts. The inclusion of found objects, earth, ash, charred remains of trees, wilting flowers and distorted metal means his work possesses a charge that can jarringly invoke repressed and suppressed memories of unspeakable events, causing the viewer to pause before an overwhelming amount of texture and disparate materials in his works. I studied Kiefer's work before embarking on the first journey to Wongawol as a way of becoming embodied with his processes. Although his works are on a gigantic scale, I was struck by his detailed and prolific use of materials, which reinforced my ideas of using the environment in my works and allowing natural materials to somewhat guide me. Kiefer's visceral concoction of surfaces become symbols of deep hidden emotions and recollections, or signals of events, with the resultant alchemy. He uses many sources and citations including religious, historical, philosophical and the mystical to explore and form his ideas (Spies, 2016), among these ideas are philosophers who espouse monistic thinking who believe that what is on earth has the "equivalent" in the stars (Spies, 2016, p. 22).

The idea that the body and the universe are each contained within the other is a recurring theme in Kiefer's works, represented often by the body forming the core

stemming from the centre of the earth and reaching to the cosmos. The motif of a large black wilting sunflower signifies infinite layers and “stands for the continuity of life and the overcoming and elimination of boundaries” (Hoerschelmann, 2016, p. 132). The sunflower simultaneously represents the blackened soil of the earth and the sun. The human body as core signifies the unity of all things, which reflects the philosophy of phenomenology and the Australian Aboriginal belief system. Kiefer renders these connections by using materials that, conversely, come about through death, destruction and a kind of violence that is involved during the making of the image via sharp carving tools, debris of dying material and a raw physical compulsion of the artist. Kiefer believes we are nourished by the cosmos and that our atoms are linked to the atoms of the earth and planetary system (Hoerschelmann, 2016). His rendering of the woodcut, *That Obscure Clarity that Falls from the Stars*, presented below, symbolises this unity with thousands of small black sunflower seeds falling from the stars.

Image of *That Obscure Clarity that Falls from the Stars* removed for copyright reasons. Copyright 2015 by Anselm Kiefer.

Figure 3. Anselm Kiefer (1997–2015), *That Obscure Clarity that Falls from the Stars*, woodcut, sunflower seeds and charcoal on paper, mounted on canvas, 375 x 396 cm.

Note: From *Anselm Kiefer: The Woodcuts*, by A. Hoerschelmann (Ed.), 2016, published by Hatje Cantz, p. 137.

THE POWER OF LINE—CY TWOMBLY

As artist, Twombly completely inhabits his paintings; the line he makes is the line he passes by. I am deeply inspired by Twombly and the way his line morphs into part of a letter, moving in a forward direction, and then becomes a collision between mythic characters or slips to form a sea. His scribbles inhabit my sternum where they swirl and rip on electric tracks with fleeting quarks and thousands of feelings and

simultaneous thoughts and emotions. He creates universes, unfathomable, from a sliver of information, a quick colour or slightly visible form. I borrowed a book of his paintings from the library, renewing it dozens of times because I needed to turn the pages many times to absorb his marks. The marks made no sense, but I needed to learn how to start from a place of unknowing, and it was Twombly's work that gave me the first clues. Share (2011) writes, "Twombly is dedicated to the crisis of the line, which is the crisis of signification" (p. 3). There is an urgency about these words that is puzzling, but there is a familiarity and a feeling that also characterises my research, of something impending, something menacing and an uncertainty how to start and how to recognise vital signs along the way.

Twombly's (1994) painting, *Untitled (Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)*, divided into three large panels, is to be read from right to left, from an accented mark or physical presence that eventually trails off to a pondering of weightlessness or unknowing. His faint passages of classical poetry partly covered by paint, barely discernible, allude to a distant cultural memory in a way that speaks to my current experience with regards to script, lost records and scratched writings on the old homestead walls of Wongawol. Before going to the station, I sourced a picture, a detail of a stockman on a horse finely scratched into the mud green stucco walls of Wongawol's old homestead [9]. This image expanded in my consciousness to the extent that script and line became crucial to my exploration in the way Twombly's painting language contains an expressivity of line on an existential level (Bastian, 1992).

Bathers (as cited in van Alphen, 2017) writes, Twombly's "line is a visible action" (p. 110), whether it is faint, heavy or practically indiscernible, it is a "pulsion" (p. 110), a directional force that through its energy creates trace. In this sense, Twombly's work can be described as gestural as it maps his body movements while he induces existential and ancient qualities of line at the same time that he physically creates line. His line resembles a form of writing, an obscure language, and as in the study of palaeography, the path the hand takes is of primary concern to the researcher. Twombly's (1970) painting, *Treatise on the Veil*, inspired by a musical piece, is a meditation on time and space. He describes it as a "time line without time"

(De Salvo, 1985, as cited in Dervaux, 2019, p. 14). The enormous fields of grey are interrupted with white chalk lines and numerical jottings that resemble the early markings of perhaps an architectural drawing. Withheld information creates a sense of confusion, coded, like a cryptologist leaving marks for a future generation to decipher.

Image of *Treatise on the Veil (Second Version)* (detail), 1970, removed for copyright reasons. Copyright 2005 by The Menil Collection, Houston, Cy Twombly Foundation.

Figure 4. Cy Twombly (1970), *Treatise on the Veil (Second Version)* (detail), house paint and crayon on canvas 300 x 999.8 cm.

Note: From *Treatise on the Veil (Second Version)*, by C. Twombly, 1970, house paint and crayon on canvas, exhibited at The Menil Collection (<https://www.menil.org/collection/objects/7531-treatise-on-the-veil-second-version>).

THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE—WARWICK THORNTON

I use Thornton's (2018) film *Sweet Country* and its narrative as a stand-in for Wongawol and its history, the former being symbolic of historical trauma/s that cannot yet be directly or fully confronted. Kristeva (1982) writes, "There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being, [thus], it is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled" (p. 3). In the darkest memories of Auschwitz—when the crimes of Nazi

Germany have reached their zenith—humanity is killed, and the individual becomes physically and psychologically separated from all that is meant to save him or her (Kristeva, 1982): “It is death infecting life” (p. 5). When the subject, “weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that is none other than abject” (p. 5). Kristeva’s (as cited in Rudge, 2015) theorisation that abjection is the psychological response of victims of actual and inherited trauma is a phenomenon that plays out in *Sweet Country* (Thornton, 2018) and among Australian Aboriginal people. Abjection, in the context of Thornton’s (2018) film, is a physical sickening (Rudge, 2015) of experiencing or of witnessing unspeakable events, which causes a breakdown of self. This disturbance attacks internal structures of identity and one’s understanding of personal and societal systems and a sense of order (Rudge, 2015). Separation from the self is a way to survive. Equally important is Wajnryb’s (2001) writing on trauma-induced silence and how the pathways of a silent vocabulary within traumatised families is a powerful form of communication. She analyses the vocabulary characteristics of families and survivors of trauma and attempts to map the unusual, and often oblique, pathway narratives manifest in fragmentary, disappearing ways. Wajnryb (2001) believes the first step to healing is an understanding of the silence of language.

Thornton allows me to be an onlooker to my own perplexing family history. The approximation of Thornton’s (2018) film *Sweet Country* to the history surrounding Wongawol is uncanny, although not surprising when one sees the historical time line. Set in the Northern Territory in 1920, the title of the film evokes the colonial description for excellent pastures to grow cattle on Aboriginal lands. The area was considered back country, usually desert regions, far from settlements where only early explorers, prospectors, anthropologists and missionaries had passed. Frequently settled by returning soldiers from World War I during a period of extensive government land grants, the men were often rough, violent, quick to use their rifles and had an attitude consistent with colonial interlopers. The film is based on a true story about a black man who killed a white man in self-defence. It is set against an Australian backdrop and its vast complexities of racial inequalities, violent frontier

conflicts and the seizures of Aboriginal lands (Dowd, 2018). Add to this lethal concoction, government-controlled indentured slave labour of all Aboriginal people [10], racial laws, faith preachers and the lingering perception that Australia was still terra nullius [11]. Given this mix, Australian Aboriginals, from the beginning, developed an extraordinary cunning that somehow prevented them from being entirely extinguished from this land.

To capture the menacing atmosphere, Thornton employs the cinematic technique of flash forward or foreshadowing, to create a foreboding or heightened tension in the viewer about what is coming next. Rapid film frames of a character covered in blood or a close-up of a gunshot wound are confusing but also warn the viewer that a tragedy is impending. A sense of the hunter and hunted is created, which is not unlike the reality for Aboriginal people during the continuous phases of colonisation and the ensuing development of settlements, mines sites and farming land. Thornton, as an Aboriginal filmmaker from Alice Springs, grew up in the environment he is filming. He believes that the landscape is “alive and talking and watching you” (Thornton & River, 2017), like a sentient spiritual being that Aboriginal people are one with. He discovered that the Australian stockman hat (akubra) was one of his most important cinematic tools because it shaded the characters’ faces from the brilliant relentless sun of the Central Desert. Light and shadow became a feature that allowed for some interesting effects while filming the characters, invoking different moods and a visual language that determined the use of other tools.

The stockman hat was like a photographer’s studio umbrella, which could be tilted and easily moved to great effect. The hat determined the placement or angle of the camera because the lens had to be below the actor’s eye line to capture the features of the face. This is noticeable when watching the film since the camera’s angle positions the viewer at a different height from a normal standing position. The effect is that one becomes intimate with the surroundings and sees more details of the landscape because one’s eye is closer to the ground. Instead of using drones to film from above to capture epic scenes, Thornton creates a visual language that is reminiscent of life in the Northern Territory outback in the 1920s. He uses an ultraviolet lens to increase the effect of a heat wave, which gives the grass and trees

an electrified feeling as the camera sweeps knee high through the tops of the wheat-coloured grasses. He creates a grainier effect on the rocks and sky, which dramatically contrast with the finer grained settings for filming faces. His intention was to give the desert its own character using simple camera techniques, allowing the viewer to see the landscape as Aboriginal people did.

Thornton carefully develops the main husband and wife Aboriginal characters to the degree that the audience feel they have an intimate relationship with them. There are few words spoken through the entire film, which allows the viewer to slowly absorb the visual stimulation and imagine, while taking cues more from body language than from the spoken word. The crass, often drunken insensitivities of some of the white characters starkly contrast with the expansive and nuanced natures of the Aboriginal people. When hunted, every fibre in one's body is alert to potential dangers, and this feeling is acutely communicated throughout the film. While their lands, culture and people were being destroyed, the Aboriginal people also had to navigate the vagaries of the worst kind of white men, an imposed white man's law and the imposition of new religions whose mission was invariably to civilise the 'native' into white man's ways.



Figure 5. Still from the film *Sweet Country*, Warwick Thornton, director (2018), Samuel Goldwyn Films.

Note: From “Warwick Thornton on *Sweet Country*: ‘Australia is Ready for Films Like This’”, by L. Buckmaster, 2018, *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/24/warwick-thornton-on-sweet-country-australia-is-ready-for-films-like-this>). Copyright 2018 by Samuel Goldwyn Films.

During the establishment of the first remote pastoral stations in the deserts of Australia, one can only imagine the lawlessness that played out. Often, suitable station country was discovered by men searching for gold (McDonald, 1996), as was the case with Wongawol, a pursuit that was characterised by a blind and often crazed focus on obtaining the metal with little regard to anything in their path. Remote mine sites in WA often became ration depots for tribal Aboriginal people as their lives began to dramatically change from a tribal existence to a level of dependence on contact with settlers [12]. This was exacerbated by periodic droughts, epidemics of introduced diseases, draconian laws [13] restricting the liberty of Aboriginal people, and the pervasive threat of massacres and widespread retribution for crimes determined by laypeople and the authorities [14]. Desert tribespeople were equipped for survival in

a harsh environment over many thousands of years; surviving the white people was a new challenge.

The early relationship between desert tribespeople and the Europeans looking for gold is complex, with many of the early events unknown because, typically, a culture of prospecting means the population is largely itinerant, and a written history by the participants at best is patchy. 'First contact' is an interesting concept because prospectors would have needed the assistance of the desert Aboriginals to navigate the harsh terrain safely and avoid the dangers not only of being speared but also of ongoing tribal hostilities (McGrath, 1987). One should ask, where did these Aboriginal people come from—the immediate area or from areas on the coast where there were settlements and where the local Aboriginal people were already in the service of the white settlers? If the latter, the individuals would also be in danger of being speared for being in the wrong tribal country. In the case of Wongawol, the origins of the station's Aboriginal population is unknown. Past studies of this part of the desert are scarce, and anecdotal evidence potentially matching names to government files is the only means of piecing information together at this stage. Unfortunately, elders from the early days of the station's establishment have all died, and the surviving stories have suffered many iterations and degrees of embellishment [15].

The queries abound—how did my great white ancestor pass through country to establish Wongawol as a pastoral station; which path did he take through the relentlessly hot and dangerous desert; who assisted his passage through tribal lands; how many were in the travelling party; where did they come from; why did they settle at Wongawol; and who built the stone homestead, water wells, stone cattle troughs and round yards and brought the cattle down? Pursuit of these specific answers is for another paper. However, it is interesting to ponder the environmental factors that might have influenced the eventual paths taken, such as the element of water and its availability. McGrath (1987) writes, stations became "superwaterholes" (p. 20) but were already part of the ancient waterhole system that existed for desert Aboriginals over centuries. Water was more precious than gold in these parts and as thread or trace, if followed, would reveal a history most illuminating. Coercion techniques of Aboriginal people, such as the forced ingestion of salt to lead them to seek water and

other forms of torture were used by the settlers. Cattlemen restricted waterholes and used Aboriginal labour to build wells, which was an arduous task requiring great strength to cut the necessary amount of wood to line the wells and dig the earth to huge depths in some cases.

There was a complicated exchange between the desert Aboriginal and the pastoralist, which seems to have developed organically in the early days because the stations were extremely remote and far from the prying eyes of the law. A symbiosis of sorts was required since each needed the other to survive. The white settlers were here to stay. That was not going to change for the desert tribes, and with this came an appropriation of their land, lethal diseases and disruption to cultural life. Waterholes now were drawn upon by thirsty horses, camels, cattle and their masters. The devastating changes to Aboriginal life that were due to the white settler required an adaptation by Aboriginal people to ensure their survival. Like Wongawol, some became the station's team of workers while others camped further out, still maintaining their cultural ways (McGrath, 1987). Mainly because of the remoteness of station life, Aboriginal people were able to cross relatively freely between station life and the bush. There were no fences in the early days because stations generally covered an area of one million square miles. It suited the station owner to have an Aboriginal labour force, who were mostly independent in terms of their living arrangements and provided themselves with food from hunting and gathering. Beef or lamb supplied by the station was an enticement (McGrath, 1987, p. 20) to keep the Aboriginal labour force in the immediate area and to minimise their visits to waterholes because their presence scared the cattle from coming in to drink [16].

At Wongawol, one can deduce that the able-bodied labour force would build themselves dirt floor shelters out of mulga logs and spinifex or brush, which were called bough sheds [17]. These were usually not far from the homestead and close to the water supply. During the summer wet season the bough shed provided shelter from the rain, and in the dry winters, a place from the cold. It is believed they fixed canvas inside the bough shed to provide further shelter from the elements or built brush sides onto the mulga structure. On hot nights, they would sleep in the cool of the dry creek bed where the breeze would whirl through the cut of the creek, cooling

the sleeping bodies. The rest of the group who were deemed to be 'bush natives' [18] camped further out from the homestead within a mile's radius. The exchange between these two groups is interesting to ponder. Stories told by my father who worked on Paradise Station on the Fitzroy River in the Kimberley in 1942 described how Aboriginal workers supported the others to a degree, and how they all practised their culture and for weeks at a time all walked long distances into the desert to perform ceremonies [19].



Figure 6. Bough shed on Wongawol Station, 1950s.

Note: Photograph, permission courtesy of J. and L. Snell, 2020.

Thornton's main Aboriginal characters are the farm and domestic help for the preacher who has not built his church yet. The church's construction, a metaphor for goodness, community and safe haven, historically invokes a mixed story of sorrow and salvation for Indigenous Australians (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). In the film, a particularly brutal veteran soldier from the new neighbouring station wants help to build a fence and persuades the preacher to let

him borrow his “black stock” (Dolgoplov, 2018, p. 3). The Aboriginal male is badly abused by the white and set to back-breaking work. The female is raped. As audience, our sense of justice and ethical sensibilities is bluntly challenged with the rawness of an onlooker since we are already on the side of the Aboriginal couple. Thornton has developed their human feelings and emotions primarily through body movements, which we have individually interpreted in relation to our own lived experiences. They are real people with real emotions, not the tokenistic exotic Australian Aboriginal painted on 1950s glass ashtrays. The white pastoralist then asks for a young boy to work for him whom, for no reason, he chains up at night. The boy escapes and is holed up at the preacher’s farm shed. When the rogue veteran soldier comes looking for him with rifle in hand and threatens to shoot his way into the preacher’s house, the main character acts in self-defence and shoots the soldier in the chest; the force of the shotgun causes him to become airborne. The preacher is not at home, and the two main characters, in desperation, decide to go on the run because they already understand their poor chances of justice in a system that is not their own.

What follows is an unfolding and visual snapshot of the largely untold epic clash between black Australia and white Australia, which also parallels that of Wongawol. The multiple layers of meaning in human relations is set against magnificent scenes of the desert landscape, which in this film has been developed as much as any of the characters. The Indigenous characters are at one with the ancient environment and we see it through their eyes. The grasses come alive as we move through at shin level noticing the colours of the moving blades and flowering heads of different species. The rocks, stones and sand are vibrant and communicate a sense of touch against the skin with a visual ruggedness as they form breakaways and conglomerates reaching for the cloudless blue sky above. The preacher joins the chase to ensure his Aboriginal farm hand is fairly treated by the marauding lawless officials. The preacher’s presence slowly realises a conscience in the sergeant who develops a human side, which we see unfolding; but still the odds are hopelessly against the pair on the run. We sit through the bush court case, and we see the Aboriginal character incarcerated in a tin shed, his body uncontrollably shaking with fear, communicated in a way we are not familiar with, causing us to empathise with him and experience the shocking turn of events he

finds himself in. We are confronted with an ancient people in trauma, a system glaringly and criminally unjust; we see the humanness of the Indigenous people and their efforts of resistance and realise the hopelessness of the unequal frontier conflicts. We see the stunning landscape and see that the European settlers want it for themselves. We see the hope and drive of the Aboriginal characters for a better life, in their own land, free from persecution and unjust governments and laws. We are given a moment of hope when the accused is found not guilty of murder, but that is horrifically and violently dashed when he is fatally shot in the chest by a sniper from the town on his way back to the preacher's place.

INITIAL THOUGHTS ON METHODS AND MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT

Characteristic of all creative processes is that the methods, techniques and materials employed are constantly evolving. With the knowledge I gained about the phenomenon of my methodology of walking, I made initial choices to utilise maps both old and recent to begin making lines on paper and copper etching plates. A brief exploration of Tim Ingold's (2010) work is useful in that it examines the difference between walking in the physical landscape and walking in the imagination through painting, music, writing and reading. He draws on the embodied journeys of the medieval European monastic practitioners, the traditional paintings of the Yolngu people of Australia's Northern Territory and the works of abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky and Chinese painter Ching Hao. As they travelled, the medieval monastic practitioners believed that walking and writing emanated from the same source. Thoughts were pulled in and treatises were composed. Text and landscape were considered "ontologically equivalent" (Ingold, 2010, p. 17). The Yolngu people have no text but they "inhabit their paintings" (Ingold, 2010, p. 19) as the monks inhabit their scriptures. The Yolngu's geometric paintings and the *mappae mundi* [20] of medieval times are conduits for transcendence into the realm of the unity of all things.

Ingold writes that Kandinsky's paintings share the same quality, in which colour embodies sound and has a direct effect upon the nervous system of the viewer. Ingold's metaphysical and existential exploration continues with Hao, the Chinese

painter; he professes that there are “six essentials of painting—spirit, resonance, thoughts, motif, brush and ink” (Ingold, 2010, p. 23) and believes that when truth is revealed only then can spirit and substance be fully expressed (Ingold, 2010). Walking and painting are immersive experiences, which cannot be separated but are reflections of the same phenomena (Ingold, 2010). Through the alchemic properties of drypoint etching I hoped to reveal similar existential qualities. As a kind of preparation for a ceremonial event, I engaged in preparatory drawing and painting processes before I went into the field. This enabled me to make linkages between lines on the maps—which can be survey and topological maps—my imagination and the actual desert environment. All these processes constitute the phenomenon of mark making, which has the potential to reveal imaginings, narratives and experiences.

Hogan (2017) writes about the geological strata of the landscape and the process of printmaking and how they are deeply connected. She describes “surfaces of place as a matrix” (p. 12) where interactions between materials occur, revealing glimpses of deeper meanings of the environment and cultures. In 2013, she began a large-scale work on the Truganini Track, which is named after the Tasmanian Nuenonne tribeswoman hailed by mainstream history as the island’s last Aboriginal. The orogeny of the earth, which Hogan refers to as the matrix, informs her of geological events and the resultant structural formations created on the earth’s crust. She examines these influences in her practice of printmaking by laying rolls of printing paper on the ground using the interface of the surfaces (of earth and paper) to see how they react. Hogan (2017) believes that the environment and cultures are in a constant flow of becoming and that printmakers are well positioned to “experiment and interact with the many layers” (p. 12). She personifies the crust of the earth as if it is a skin membrane that reacts to the “pull of the moon and is dragged back down by the pressures of gravity” (p. 15). In this sense, printmaking processes for Hogan have the capacity to uniquely record the interactions of orogeny and the cultural layers of our existence.

Artist and sculptor Paul Coldwell (Thomas, 2017) reflects a choreographed and simultaneously an interrupted movement towards an integration or fusion of body and space with his prints. His works represent a fragmented relationship between object

and subject as he adopts a process of layering, doublings and transparencies (Thomas, 2017) to make tangible that which is intangible. Coldwell's body thoughts and movements cannot be separated from his creative work. Everyday travelling objects such as a suitcase, comb or toothbrush are superimposed on wild multi-directional branch-like lines and random star constellations of the universe. The mundane is positioned with the worldly in a mix that has no resolution, challenging the viewers' habitual codified perceptions.

The use of photography and film was an essential element of my obtaining visual data as final works and as source material for working in the printmaking studio. My intention was to use film and photography in creative ways throughout the embodied desert experience. For instance, Raban's (as cited in Chen, 2013) emphasis on the functionality of the film medium in relation to the one holding the camera potentially extends to the meshing of filmmaker, camera and surroundings becoming one, which is the union of the physical and the metaphysical. Merleau-Ponty (1962) perceives the world existentially, proposing that the all-knowing world and our sensory functions are in communion. He believes that the phenomena of the emergent self and the universe are in a continual process of becoming (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). By utilising creative processes and techniques that invite and allow an altered sensory perception of the world, Raban attempts to manifest pathways or make visible traces of a journey representing the notion of the unity of all things.

A closer examination reveals that Raban (Chen, 2013) is an expert at disrupting codes of perception in his structural film *Fergus Walking*. The film is set in a street in the East End of London. Using unusual angles while filming, he heightens sensory intake for the viewer. The metronomic pace of the walker against a backdrop of the brick urban environment coupled with the unconventional camera work creates disruption and confusion in relation to a mundane activity. The film creates a tension, the viewer stops, re-runs and fast-forwards the visual information to make sense of the situation. Fergus walks past objects that reappear in the same shot—a street sign once walked past is now in front of him again. The viewer is estranged from "habitual perception [by the shifting order of] perceptual relationships [as they try to rely on] memory, anticipation and imagination" (Chen, 2013, p. 536). Raban provocatively

plays with movements in relation to time and space. By disrupting perception, a consciousness of different, appropriated space is perceived, forming a new relationship or new dynamic, which essentially cannot be resolved as the dynamic continues to disrupt. Raban's film invokes new meanings, the viewer becomes involved in the unfolding of phenomena and can no longer rely on memory or the eye but on other sensibilities (Chen, 2013).

For the Australian desert Aboriginal, there is no separation between consciousness, mind, body and the earth on which his or her feet tread. There are important sites and sacred sites that are not seen outside the experience of the body or considered a thing to record, but rather, part of the existence of all things. Walking often follows ancient songlines [21] or dreaming tracks, which are related to every facet of their existence, from collecting berries, to imitating animal behaviours, to travelling to the next life-saving water hole. The experience is omnipotent and reflects the phenomenologists' thinking that all things are connected. I avoided any kind of numerical recording since it became apparent that it had no place in my action of tracing ancestral lives and the physical and spiritual lines they followed over this vast country. Any attempt to quantify or measure, such as using global positioning systems, negated the immersive process that I believed was essential to move into. The challenge was to become one with the environment in an immersive cycle, as opposed to linear or chronological, and attempt to experience place far from the influence of the Western gaze, which had so far been the predominant voice recording events in my place of research.

PART TWO

Three Embodied Journeys to Wongawol

ONE—SEPTEMBER '17

*I was supposed to feel something.
'WONGAWOL', the sign said, on a flat part of the road
in the centre of vastness.
The road turned, carving a big arc towards 'WONGAWOL'.
I returned from never being there.*

(Cim Sears, 2020)

I got out of the car and looked down on the place that had filled me with dread for the past 10 years. Even the name 'WONGAWOL' sounded menacing. Instead, I was filled with quiet anticipation. To the right in the distance I could see a collection of white structures intermittently broken to the eye by desert scrub and low-lying trees. Beyond the rise of the Princess Ranges [1], the land infinitely stretched out in all directions so that it felt like a new land and maybe not even part of Australia. All sense of direction now seemed muddled so that, perhaps, it might be the centre of somewhere else. Upon seeing Wongawol for the first time there was no sense of why, or what, just stillness before a vast ancient plain, which filled me with a sense of awe. Somehow, by my being there, by physically walking this land, I thought the stories might unfold. In phenomenological terms, I was "always-already there" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 32), not least because my ancestors had walked these lands for thousands of years, but also because the untold stories ran through my veins and had shaped my DNA, and now I was here to discover what those stories were.

I pondered de Certeau's (2008) ideas of walking, whereby people walk a line and a script is created but the walker is typically unaware of the script and does not read the script. Conversely, I chose to be aware of not only my steps but those of the people before me who throughout history had inhabited and walked vast distances in this land called the Western Desert. Equipped with copper plates, etching tools, paper and graphite, I imagined that I could scratch up or draw the stories into existence as I explored the terrain. I had little to go by except a few descriptions of place mentioned in the government archives [2], which I had received in 2005. I had the names of my family members and a few descriptive details of the police raid that led to most of the

people on Wongawol that day in 1935 being incarcerated with arrest warrants authorised by the government's Chief Protector of Aborigines [3]. I learned that my people slept in a creek bed close to the homestead during the dry season and a bough shed on the flat during the wet season, which had a small tent in the middle that was intended to offer some protection from the elements [4].

I got back in the car and could hardly believe I was approaching the place where my mother was born 84 years ago. She had no knowledge of her past or where she came from because she was orphaned by the state [5]. Bumping over the cattle grate that marked the entrance to the station, my first vision of station life was a young girl driving a tractor. I called out to her for the whereabouts of the station owners and she indicated towards a transportable building, which was the muster dining hall. I was warmly welcomed by the owners; we excitedly talked about the long journey here, which way I had come and where I had stopped overnight. The station was like a small community in the middle of nowhere; it felt safe in contrast to the new vulnerability on the remote desert roads. Lawns were being watered by bores among the vast desert expanse, and oldish buildings, sheds and dongas [6] spread out spaciouly on the soft dirt that was surrounded by a rocky landscape, as if a meteorite had recently hit the earth. We spoke of the lake and flowers I saw as I approached Wongawol and the beautiful purple mulla-mulla and weeping mulga, a favourite of the cattle. Presently, I set my tent up outside the perimeter of the station's homestead area where the wild cattle roamed, and I wondered what beast would visit me in the night and if I would be able to capture the stars in the night sky with my camera. I thought about the large maps [7] I had pored over in the attempt to connect with the landscape. At this point they seemed a distant relevancy.

After an invitation to lunch with the skeleton mustering team who had stayed on to complete the transportation work and tagging of cattle coming down from Carnegie Station, the owner showed me the original homestead where my people had lived. My great grandfather founded Wongawol on virgin ground in 1902. He and his business partner established a number of pastoral stations, including Yelma, Windidda, sheep stations further south and a chain of butcher stores throughout the goldfield towns, which supplied meat for the gold rush phenomenon, meat and horses for the

two government-led World War efforts and horses for the iconic Australian transportation company known as Cobb & Co [8]. We walked past massive generators on the fine terracotta earth, past hundreds of large, round hay bales and the sprawling cattle yards. The old homestead was named 'Boogoodoo', presumably after the creek that runs nearby. It now sits partly abandoned except for the stored mustering equipment, reticulation pipes, vehicle axles and numerous old broken washing machines. The low mulga log fence has now gone, as has the original water tank, and the verandas have also been removed. High above the tin roof a butcherbird sits on a long pole and warbles as the sun begins to sink on the horizon.

'Boogoodoo' was now 115 years old and still very much intact apart from the light-letting corrugated tin areas. It was built in two parts with a central area made from tin, which completely opens to the north. The stone was collected from a nearby quarry and is black in colour with deep reds and lighter colours veining through the predominantly blood-black rock. The large rectangular stones looked like they had been cut with human precision but had naturally formed that way. The long giant flagstones on the floor are highly polished from a hundred years of walking feet and contain a history that could reveal every secret detail. The kitchen has a magnificent cooking area, which was originally an open fireplace with a large chimney creating the entire western wall. Above the fire is a very large wooden lintel made from a single mulga tree. The living room also has a large open fireplace with an impressive chimney creating another entire wall. The original bed frames in the smaller room are made from mulga tree trunks and would have originally been stretched with bullock hides. Throughout the building are turret holes positioned high on the outward-facing walls that allowed rifles to shoot from in times of defence from Aboriginal desert tribespeople and white people. Originally, the homestead was built for my great grandfather as his abode, but it is unknown if he physically constructed it. A considerable knowledge of stonework and architectural calculations was needed for such a building with successful chimneys and perfect stonework and to account for its longevity.



Figure 7. Boogoodoo homestead on Wongowol Station.

Note: Photograph taken prior to the 1950s. Permission courtesy of J. and L. Snell, 2020.

Boogoodoo was overwhelming—the significance of the happenings within these walls harnessed me with the numbness of someone returning to a crime scene. The events of the police raid in February 1935 occurred here. For the past 10 years, I had only imagined the terror felt by my infant mother and her family in the face of a forced removal. Spies’ (2016) words, “untamed darkness” (p. 26), describing Anselm Kiefer’s woodcuts, apply here and prevailed over the moment, then and now, combining thoughts of “injury and destruction, terror and mourning” (p. 21.) The walls tell a thousand stories by the inscriptions and graffiti scratched on the white and pale faded mint stucco. Some of the scratches are very deep, some gouged wide so that the stone and mud mortar is exposed. Some are so light, featuring feathery cursive writing, that they almost resemble sacred writings of some kind. And then there is more illegible script and line drawings of horses, stockmen and large horned bullocks. Names of the authors and hearts with arrows appear everywhere, telling the intimate lives of those who lived or worked here for a short while. Etched dates of days, months and

years going back beyond the 1930s abound, uniquely crystallising a perfect record of a million moments.

There was too much information for me here. I decided to go to the creek where I could walk among nature, saturate myself with the desert environment and absorb the stories at a slower pace. Copper etching plates, paper and camera seemed a wishful way of embarking on this journey but my choice of materials was initially informed by my existing art practice, which was heavily immersed in printmaking techniques enhanced by a degree in photography and two decades of painting experience in mainly oils and ochres. I wanted to expose a line, allow it to see the light of day, tell the truth and let it settle upon the government heads of this country, for them to know the truth about the violence, deprivation and cruelty: the historical horror of a terrible kind so deeply buried that my line would make it slide from its place of hiding. I wanted to conjure the footsteps of my ancestors with line as trace, with its generative and reductive qualities, and explore and reveal the fragmentary parts of this extreme past and present. I wound along the dusty rouge road, earth so soft beneath my feet in the deep wheel tracks. Rocks had been artificially pushed to the edge, and beyond was a sea of rocks of all kinds. A dip in the track marked a creek crossing; there was no water, only evidence of a fast-flowing creek when the rains fell, leaving deep empty eddies, caught branches and the partly preserved hide of a drowned calf twisted around a small tree.

I sat next to the dead calf, which was flattened and parched by the desert sun. Its tail and one hind leg and hoof were still recognisable; the rest could have been mistaken for a suede shoulder bag. I wondered about the moment of its drowning, the terror, and how many more calves must succumb to the same fate during the wet season in this wild country. Soon I began to walk. I followed the dry creek bed lined with arid grasses, white river gums and miniritchie [9] trees with their red curling bark. The wind was personified by the tunnelling of the dry creek, whistling an ancient tune while rushing past me, and then stillness when it would completely stop. The silence accentuated the squawking annoyance of the cockatoos who seemed to vehemently object to my presence. The contrasting pink of their feathers was a stunning sight against the smooth white bark of the river gum. A grove of nine trees appeared like a

family in the light, like the nine of my family who had been taken from Wongawol 85 years ago and incarcerated far to the south. The sun was low on the horizon, highlighting the knee-high wheat-coloured grass against a brilliantly clear sky. The wind made noises, dying down and then increasing again.

The children played in the creek while their mothers watched on. I had imagined this scenario for many years because I knew from the government archives that my family lived near the creek and slept in the soft sand with the cooling night breeze in the dry season. I doubled back, retracing my footsteps while filming with a small camera attached to my torso. My foot impressions competed with the cattle hoof prints as I stopped to examine steel debris from old farm equipment washed away by cyclone rains along with the bleached bones of cattle that had perished either by flood or drought. I returned to the dead calf where there were many rocks of varying sizes, shapes and types. I placed a large copper plate on the rocky surface and searched for seven rocks to place on top of the copper plate. During my initial planning, I thought I would require a system of working and had determined that seven stones might reflect the Seven Sisters dreaming or Pleiades mythology, which runs longitudinally through the central deserts, since I could discover little about the Aboriginal people of this area. However, it seemed I was attempting to apply a method or different gaze that had no relevance or impact in such an omnipresent landscape where I needed to be still, observe with new eyes and listen—a new sensibility to ancient desert life. Nevertheless, I found seven stones and placed them on the lower half of the copper plate because this seemed a simple and reasonable starting place.

Through the initial embodied walk along the creek I began to absorb what could be described as nature's language. I felt confident enough to embark on preliminary mark making on my first copper plate as an abstraction of experience or mapping, to somehow record or make tangible my experiences. The musicality of the walk created an improvised rhythm between my body—despite my uncoordinated attempts at self-filming—and the harmonious landscape that has been playing its natural rhythms for billions of years. I thought of de Certeau (2008) describing how one walks in a place and how one appropriates that space, but I had not gained that status yet. I had little knowledge of the place I was occupying since I was starting from

a place of unknowing in many respects. I was also reminded of Chinna's (2014) words about how walking leads to poetic text and how if the body is connected to the surroundings, the body becomes a vessel to bring forth told and untold stories. As I selected the seven rocks of varying sizes, I placed them on the copper plate and with an etching tool traced around the rocks using the weight of my body to etch the lines. I sat down on the earth with the copper plate close to my torso, which meant that the differing pressure caused by my body's hovering position created deep and shallow marks simultaneously. Since I could not see the tip of the etching tool when I traced the farther side of the rocks, the marks were determined more by a blinded action in which some lines were doubled and others were incomplete. I stayed in this position for a long time until I was satisfied that I had sufficiently absorbed my surroundings.



Figure 8. Dry creek bed close to Wongawol homestead.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2017.

I slowly started to notice details of the grasses growing in the dry creek bed with their golden blades and blood iron flower heads. There were also pale smoky-leaved bushes with a roundish yellow flower and a small plant close to the ground with

crimson petals. I took a sprig of each and placed them between the pages of a small Moleskine with creamy blank pages. I sat with the etched copper plate, the stones still in position, contemplating their power, all the while wondering if I was in the place where my ancestors had lived and played and if the stones held secrets that they might soon reveal. Anselm Kiefer's art practice reminded me of the importance of my being in this moment. Much of Kiefer's work represents a dark history in time, the holocaust (Jones, 2014). The enormity of what happened to Aboriginal people in Australia is not dissimilar, and yet grappling with this reality seemed somehow distant, like a fog. Trying to maintain the intensity of feeling was difficult when there was little or no evidence of the horrors that befell my people and many others. The stones metaphorically represented an archaeological dig, like the layers of a geological past that might reveal something about the early inhabitants before white settlers and beyond. The etched copper plate was an evocation of the past in real time, fusing the present with the past. It resembled a musical score influenced by the natural sounds of my surroundings, the birds, rustling of leaves and the ebb and flow of the wind winding its way through the creek bed.

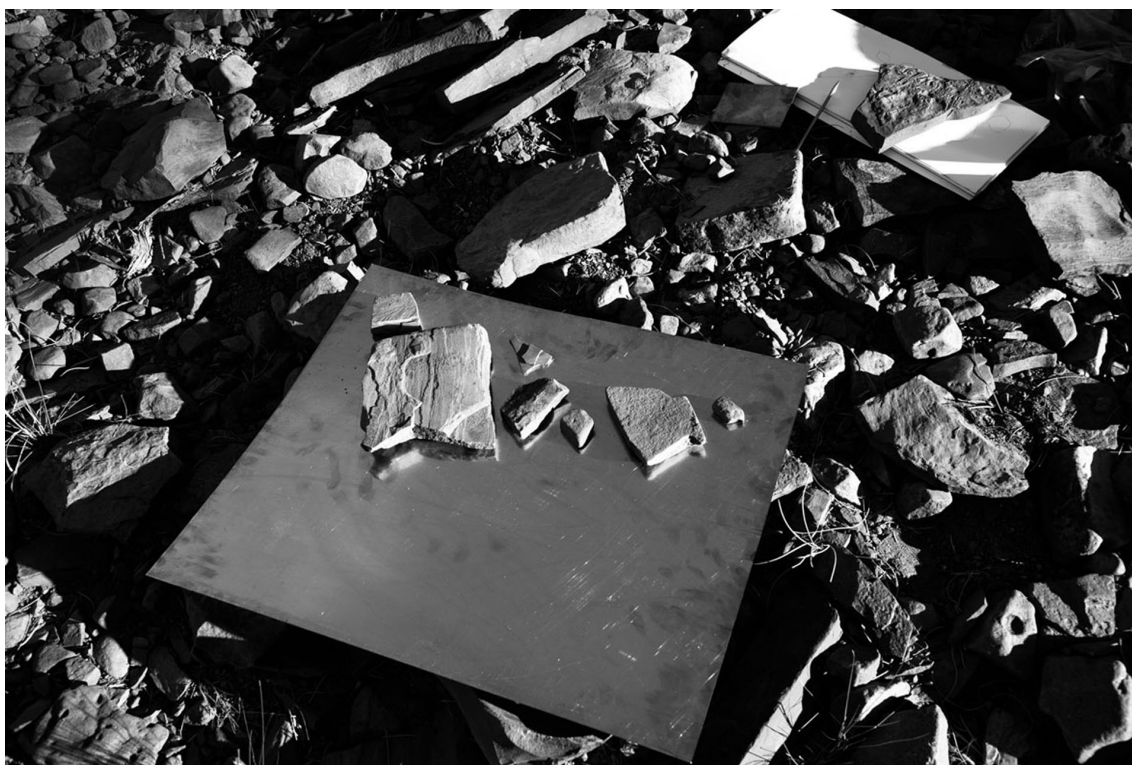


Figure 9. Copper etching plate, rocks and stones in the creek bed.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2017.

As I allowed the sounds to wash over me and absorb the ancient geology of the rocks and soft earth, I started to realise the infinitude of my quest to trace a people who have lived in this desert for tens of thousands of years. As attributed to artist Cy Twombly, my initial “visualization of time [was] materializing in a temporal progression” (Dervaux, 2019, p. 14). The etched line allowed me to slow down time in a suspension of bird sounds, interrupted only by the variation in the depth and raggedness of the cut I caused by my fluctuating body weight upon the etching tool. The copper plate had now fused with the environment. The low sun cast a bright mirror image of the stones onto the plate, a doubling of image, a reflection of the past so perfectly rendered in the light created by a most unusual desert dusk. Making my way back to the homestead after many hours, I came upon a flat rock with detailed markings of fossils. The other side had equally spaced wave-like undulations as if it were the bed of a shallow sea. The side with the markings depicted small plant patterns with minute intricacy. I thought it might hold the spines of small sea creatures, but they could also be the spines of small fern fronds. The find of a fossilised

stone was auspicious on my first day at Wongawol, and though it had been on this earth for time beyond my comprehension and had weathered the ages of the elements, I carried it like a fragile possession. As darkness fell upon the station, the black sky became illuminated by the whiteness of the Milky Way and the thick celestial soup of stars.

The owner of the station stopped the jeep, got out and attended to the popped bonnet of our rather battered mustering vehicle. We were on our way to Mingol Pool, an outcamp about 100 kilometres from the main homestead. I knew a little about the outcamps because in the archive files there was a description in one of the police statements that a young girl of about 14 years old was seen walking back out there [10]. A tribal elder had told the owner that Aboriginal tribes walked from Warbuton [11] to meet around here, which is a fair distance of 500 kilometres. While I was contemplating the endurance needed for such a long desert journey by foot, the driver said that the owner of Glen-Ayle Station thought my great grandfather, founder of Wongawol, arrived from the north, possibly from the Pilbara. The story around these parts is that his business partner had the money and they took up the station country in the 1940s. According to the archives I had received, they founded the station country in 1902, but no one had access to these restricted files except for Indigenous family members. I made no correction to the story because I wanted to hear this version of events and it seemed that it was rare for the owner to speak about such matters. I leaned forward in the gap between the front seats to hear his words, determined not to miss any of his story. The window was open as I caught sight of the passing desert country, scant vegetation, a bit of a fence once delineating a cattle yard or bore, dead trees, earth changing colour from reds to calcium white to shiny black. An eagle was occasionally sighted, and bush cattle meandering slowly and curiously staring. I roughly jotted down in my Moleskine as many words coming from the front seat as I could manage as we slowly drove along the corrugated dirt road.

We came across an old camel cart, dilapidated, almost flat to the ground from being there for so long, lying at a huge distance from anywhere and at least 90 kilometres from the homestead. The earth was flat and hard, black mostly with little stones like peppercorns and shiny. The wood of the carriage had disintegrated into

splinters, grey and sharp, the steel a deep red chocolate colour and pitted from weathering in the relentless desert sun. I wondered how it came to be stranded out here so far from any settlement. Perhaps people and animals had perished as still happens today if preparation for travel is faulty during the summer months. I reflected on the file I had come across many years before in the state archives, of an Aboriginal woman who was the only survivor during a double murder when a white man and Aboriginal man had fought over her on the road to Lake Violet. The men simultaneously shot each other, and she was the only witness to this event. She described the carriage they were on and how she had hidden behind the carriage as the two men engaged in a jealous fight to the end [12]. I wanted to take a piece of the camel cart home, to put in my plastic specimen box, but I resisted because I knew the relic should remain in its desert grave where the earth's elements could naturally destroy its man-hewn skeleton of forged steel. I turned my attention to the black shiny pebbles. There was a large expanse of just black, the result of weathering bringing down a shallow decline of eroded rocks over billions of years. I walked with my head down seeing the deep red-brown earth filling the small spaces between the black pebbles. I was bent over so my eyes could see, walking with eyes, looking a little ahead at an angle to catch the sun's glint on any crystals that lay on the surface of this land.



Figure 10. Dilapidated camel cart abandoned far from the homestead.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2017.

It was difficult to look so hard, eyes focused so intensely that everything began to blur. My torso became very bent, so that my spine was parallel to the sky. I had full view of my feet being placed on the ground while my eyes made an attempted sweep of every place. The sun was at an angle to the earth, which made it easy to pick up the refracted light from crystals, but they were small and needed much concentration to detect. Clear crystals and milky crystals of varying sizes lay among the black pebbles. I began to find them; some were as big as an apple seed and others the length of an almond kernel. At that point, my body became the needle weaving the past with the present wondering about the perceived progression of time as real or an example of human limitedness. Cyclical absence, loss and grief, characteristic of the human relationship to the earth, invoke Derrida's (as cited in Bell, 2014) notion of absence/presence, since the two concepts contain elements of the other in a long unending woven chain. My pursuit of finding crystals was an invocation of an Indigenous Western Desert practice of "psychic surgery" (Macintyre, 2007, p. 1) in which a *mapan*, or shaman, extracts from the body crystals that represents a causation

of illness. I had stumbled upon the trace of this ancient and present practice, realising it only after the fact, whereby my body was engaged before the thought. Chinna describes the body as a “divining rod” (Chinna, 2014, p. 8) slicing through time, weaving maps of past, present and other possibilities to define place (Chinna, 2014).

I had a vision of the young Aboriginal girl walking alone from Wongawol homestead northwards to the outcamp far away. Her knowledge of the terrain ran through her veins like an ancient map. For thousands of years the desert people almost effortlessly strolled this harsh land because they knew where to find food and water. They walked barefoot and followed well-worn paths the width of a human single file, placing one foot in front of the other. They walked one behind the other carrying only essential items and weapons, children on hips, shoulders or threaded through the arms against the mothers’ backs. Their dogs followed; puppies were carried by the children while they all walked in silence, their feet touching the earth like conduits to an ontological equivalent (Ingold, 2010) universe, at one with the environment and their belief systems.

I walked the length of the waterhole, a large pool of cool, opaque green water, the steep banks punctuated with large river gums shooting out at angles to the water’s surface. The branches and leaves leaning over the pool created a natural canopy of shade and coolness incongruent with the land one passes through to arrive there. The edge of something is always interesting, the beginning and end, earth giving way to water but inextricably linked in various other forms, which are hidden to the eye. I noticed the bark of the trees and their bleeding patterns and deformed lumps with wrinkles. I noticed the perfectly formed leaves being held over the centre by white twisting branches, and small nuts, which would transform into flowers and then drop into the water and onto the earth. I had to find where to place my feet to experience the edge—the trunk of the trees in suspension or the steep muddy bank.

A bough shed was close to the bank, with large flag stones on the ground that did not come from this part of the country. The original outcamp would have been equipped to sustain human life for months at a time to attend to cattle and horses over vast areas. Evidence of a stone building lay close by, with just a few quarried

stones, the same as those used at the homestead at Wongawol. Cattle and native animals found a way to the pool via a gradual descent at the farthest end, evidenced by the blanket covering of footprints. The passing Wongawol road existing today followed the original Aboriginal track, as is the case over most of Australia. Firstly, the Aboriginal people for tens of thousands of years made their way from one water source to the next forging ancestral tracks, then came the explorers and camels; the tracks became compacted and wider from camel feet. Then came the gold prospectors and pastoralists with their camels, horses and carts and the tracks became wider again until the roads were eventually pushed through. As a result, the devastation of the traditional way of Indigenous life unfolded commensurate with government control and the rise of white settlers' prosperity (Tonkinson, 1980). In many instances, my initial journey to Wongawol was a reconnaissance trip to determine through visual observation and experiential walking and making how I would move forward. Clearly, it was going to take much more time to become immersed in the place because of the sheer scale of the country and because of the complex history of all inhabitants, for whom the records were disjointed, hard to find and poor.

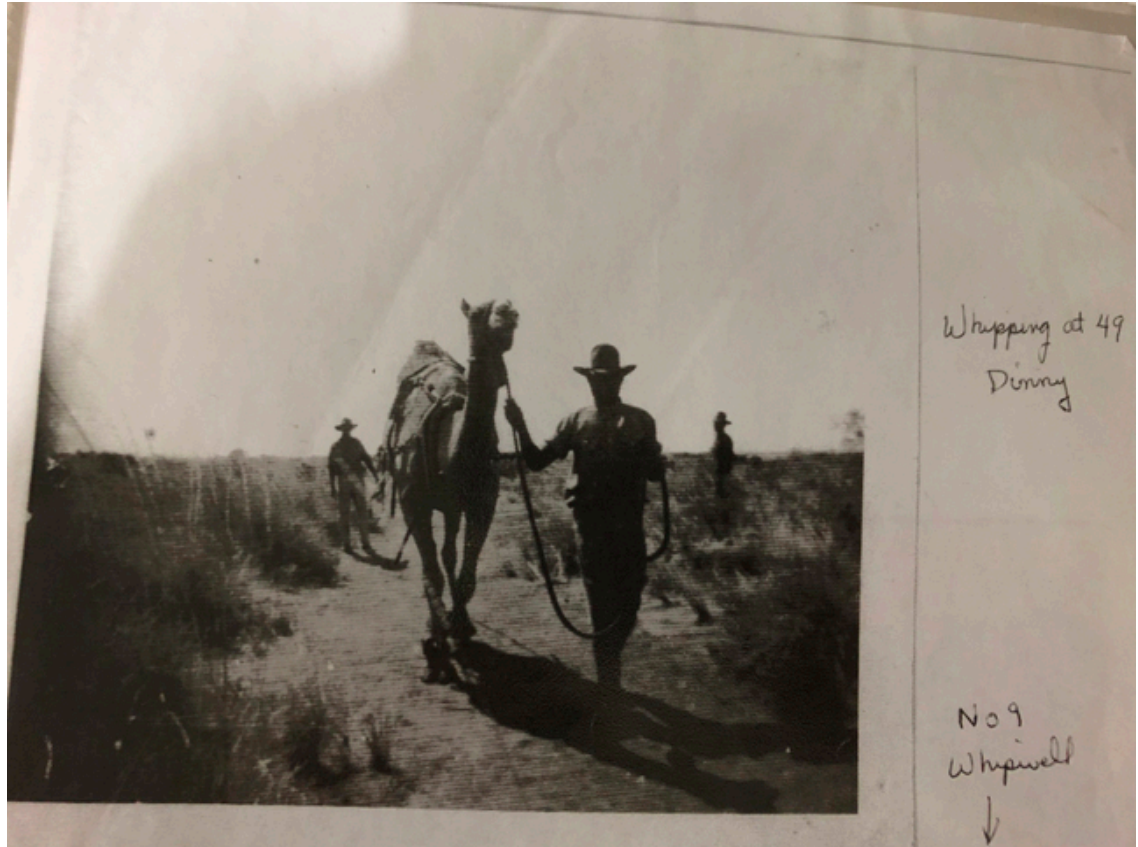


Figure 11. Aboriginal tracks compacted by camels.

Note: Photograph, permission courtesy of J. and L. Snell, 2020.

The synthesis of my Wongawol experiences slowly started to emerge once back in the printmaking studio. Inking the large plate was difficult at first until I gathered momentum and found a rhythm when applying the ink and a way of erasing the ink satisfactorily in preparation for printing. The first attempts I considered failures because of the ink-removing process. The viscousness of the ink required a good deal of rubbing otherwise greasy marks remained. During an experimental phase I rolled the ink directly onto the plate using strips of Charbonnel Raw Sienna, Sanguine and Snow White RS to create the impression of a landscape. Rather than the etched line being accentuated, the planes of ink were laid down in solid horizontal sections and resembled people in the desert as a result of the soft white ink being pressed to form thin, vertical irregular shapes. I then concentrated on line, which required removing all the ink from the plate so that the etched lines became the main feature. My tentativeness in the studio reflected my actions in the desert—not really knowing

where to start because I was largely coming from a state of unknowing. It was the beginning of being able to articulate my experiences in the desert in relation to my proposed aims and research questions, which placed the body central to exploring connections to the environment and to ancestors by using walking as a tool to realise narratives that may manifest through the making of line.

The confluence of all these elements seemed overwhelming, but I had made a substantial start. Perhaps my work would be the blueprint for what really went on in the desert at the place that is known as Wongawol. It would be a salvaging process for the absent history, for the forgotten and for the lack of acknowledgement of lives lived. I could not rush the process because each site, artefact, word and subsequent line or any other made thing would be signification of a story and time untold. I was not entirely sure why I started my journey in the creek bed. The conscious connection lay with the fact that I knew the children played in the creek and the families slept in the soft sand. A human link to the environment via the written word in the files gave me the image, though once there I did not know what I was looking for. The breeze spoke, and so did the cockatoos, and it is through connections such as these that I slowly entered the world of my ancestors. The copper plate was the musical score, the stones became the notes and the intervals in between evoked infinite sounds as well. I am guided and inspired by Twombly's use of line when he describes his *Treatise on the Veil* as a line, devoid of time (as cited in Dervaux, 2019). His fine sparse lines on the canvas draw attention to the concept of time and space, the former alluding to a linear progression and the latter to depth of past, present and future. My line is a kind of pinning down of fragments I glean of what I do not know but am searching for. The lines signify a tangible possibility, or a reality found, a sort of mapping an explorer does when discovering for the first time a new hinterland or an unmapped coastline.

Like artist Kiki Smith, my art or making "speaks from [my] own experience[s]" (as cited in Giloy-Hirtz, 2018, p. 161). I am influenced by her lightness of touch exemplified in her vast art practice and her emphasis on multiples. What is particularly relevant to my research is the transcendent quality of repetition, since embodied making is also reflected in the repetitive act of walking, whereby rhythm can lead to a heightened awareness. Multiple layering and taking elements from one printed work

in its varied iterations and applying to another print is a process that Smith (as cited in Weitman, 2003) believes opens new pathways and new concepts. While preparing for an exhibition of works in progress, I again studied printmaker Anselm Kiefer, whose works hit a chord with me, particularly his artist books, which open one to the wide range of materials he uses. On one level, I found the sheer enormity of his works disturbing: his studio covers acres of space with grotesque sculptures that resemble buildings. Acres are dedicated to memory and experiences of Nazi victims. His work is immensely powerful and is felt by the viewer. The carnage and depraved human actions, the churned-up bodies, flesh and veins is visceral. His concrete structures are menacing; nevertheless, I found his techniques and surfaces intriguing and they would come to influence me. After all, a similar history befell my people (government files, personal communications, 2019). I attempted to replicate Kiefer's essence—earth-like, abstracted, textured, mono-tonal and chaotic. I ripped paper, wet paper, collaged, scraped and engaged in repetition and variations on multiples until I was immersed in processes that defied the progression of time and began to invoke experiences of events imagined or real, like a combined fragmentation of past, present and future.

TWO—JUNE '18

*Oranges in the desert—I have not seen such a sight.
Returning to the stones with gifts of orangey flesh,
Juices the parched earth would be glad
If the sunsets were a drink.*

(Cim Sears, 2020)

Nine months had passed, and I was on the road to Wongawol again, 1000 kilometres—500 of that dirt road, depending on which route one took. This time I was going to Meekatharra directly north and then east to Wiluna and onward to the beckoning desert. I packed up my mother; she was coming this time even though she knew practically nothing, although she might have had an inkling [1]. I had to get her there before she died, perhaps for my sake—to her place of birth and the source of our lives, my brothers and me. All stores at the station had to be brought in; lettuces, I

remember, ended up on the bottom of the giant cool box sitting on the blocks of ice, the outside leaves ruined. Still, the rest was okay, and anything was a blessing there and received that way when it arrived at the station. I went to the old man's orchard up the road from my mother's place to collect seconds, a couple of hundred oranges no good for market because they had a mark or were not the right size. I watched as the old man transferred the full tub of oranges into a stretch, red string bag, wondering if the bottom ones would become squashed under the weight of the others, the bag filling up like a python swallowing a calf, reaching the height of my waist. The drive was smooth enough, and we stopped for extra fuel at Wiluna; filling the canary yellow twenty-litre containers always signals a good entry to the Western Desert. There was not a white person at the fuel station except maybe the girl behind the counter. Local Aboriginal people were coming and going, one of them giving me detailed instructions on how to operate the card-only bowser, and I felt, the adventure had begun.

I pulled up at the Yelma cattle yards, leaving my mother in the car with the door wide open since her feet are no good because of sporting injuries sustained when she was an athlete. This was the station country before Wongawol. It was considered an out station many years ago when it was owned by my people but is a ruin now. I scouted the ground looking for something, anything, that would tell me about the existence of the lives lived because I knew from the files [2] that 11 people were taken from here the same day as my family were taken. A few grey upstanding mulga poles remained, and some others were lying on the ground, which might have been the homestead, splinters of memories gone, now sun-bleached and weathered wood with a few nails and bits of wire fallen and resting on the soft earth. Walking over giant flagstones that covered an area under the sprawling tree, I thought it was probably the floor to the house, smooth and full of stories. Daily life was etched into these stones, mothers cooking, children playing, drovers stopping for a rest and tea, and the raid. I saw remnants of a water tank and over the way, water spilling from the cattle trough, the ground silvery black, waterlogged and muddy. I sensed something; a large group of cows standing silently still were watching me through the thin desert trees waiting to come and drink at the trough. Yelma was on the stock route between Wongawol and

the town of Leonora. My maternal grandmother and great grandmother drove cattle along this route for many years [3]. One can only imagine the toughness needed to accomplish this task in the blazing sun, the hardships encountered and the relentless desert country.



Figure 12. Aboriginal stockwomen on Wongawol Station.

Note: Photograph, permission courtesy of J. and L. Snell, 2020.

Aboriginal stockwomen typically wore long pants, shirts and boots when working and were part of the critical and constant working team on the station with an adeptness rarely seen (Tauri, 2016). These women were survivors. Dispossessed of their traditional lands and culture, some gravitated to the remote station homesteads in the early days of colonisation where they could find a kind of certainty of survival, even if that certainty gave rise to new harrowing, cruel and dangerous experiences. Others were born into this life as were my recent ancestors, growing up on the station, indispensable to the success of Wongawol, learning white man's ways as well as traditional culture via their elders, speaking perfect English in addition to their own

language. The sheer remoteness of Wongawol ensured that it was a station community with little outside influence at least until the mid-1930s. The civility of life there is still a mystery that I am in the process of researching and will be the concern of further study beyond this paper. However, I surmise that the people at Wongawol, were initially largely immune by distance to the laws (Smith, 2011) of WA, hideously designed and implemented to control the Indigenous population, although, they too finally became victims of these laws (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council, 2020). I wanted to find the stock route that my grandmother travelled, the desert trail that followed no road where she drove hundreds of head of cattle down to Leonora. The mysteries of this journey, this feat, remained for the time being at Yelma with my footprints in the sand, as I had no way of exploring my grandmother's driving story just yet.

Onward towards Wongawol we passed through a landscape that became very flat where the rains for thousands of years had washed down over a vast plain from the mesa in the far distance. The road cut by a lake where the water pooled, and crimson and pastel green low-lying flowers created a huge ring around the lake. Inside that was another ring of white, salty clay where the water had receded, then blue, baby-blue water with black swans gliding about. The Princess Ranges were in sight. A little way on we stopped in a creek bed where the road dipped. On one side there was a lagoon; the other side was covered with rocks of all kinds that had been washed down from the high country. I unloaded my mother's walker, which converted into a wheelchair, and positioned it for her in the creek bed so that she could see both ways. I then set off looking for jasper stone towards the water gathered in a depression where the rocks had been pulverised into tiny stones like coarse sand. After a while, I began to find small pieces of jasper, red, maroon and brown stripes delineated with an ochre-coloured line; the stones were made in the shape of square chunks and polished by time. Giant white river gums leaned towards the middle of the creek creating a separate ecosystem from the desert either side of it. Coolness was carried on the breeze, which funnelled through the cut in the earth where the water flowed during the cyclonic wet season. The enormity of the moment did not seem real, my mother's mother, her mother and even beyond would have walked this track, or indeed, it

would have been a resting place for the ancient tribes with the water hole and coolness. It was impossible to tabulate these thoughts at the time; instead, we were just there, experiencing its caress.

I put my collection of red stones in the car and we headed up the rise towards the station. Finally, we were upon the hill that looks beyond the other side of the rise. A vast land stretched forth that seemed to flow in the opposite direction to what I was used to; it felt like the middle, with everything radiating from Wongawol below. I was incredulous and silently glad that my mother could see and experience where she came from. She hailed from a desert tribe that had survived for thousands upon thousands of years, but we did not talk about this, and I expected that we never would. We settled into the muster sleeping quarters, she and I together, and then with the wheelchair I pushed her through the soft red earth leaving deep tracks in the homestead dirt. I was reminded of the wheelchair scene in the extreme and poignant film *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton, 2009) where the young Aboriginal girl pushed her young counterpart across the run-down settlement in a broken wheelchair, which typified their poetic and tragic relationship. An exhilaration filled the air. I had an inkling that my mother was aware that this was her country, but I knew even from when I was child not to broach the subject of her past. I was accustomed to this, so it did not matter; what mattered to me was the physicality of her being in the place of her beginning. I thought of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (2012) who believed that the body and the world could not be separated and that the body was the place of knowing. Time did not matter, as perception and consciousness was thought to lead to an understanding or feeling of existential authenticity (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

Despite being made an orphan and grossly neglected as a child by the government/church-run settlement camps, my mother had impeccable habits. She loved perfume and never went without it, she ironed every piece of clothing and linen, made beds before sunrise, preserved fruits galore and basically just worked. I woke in the morning to perfume filling my nostrils and my mother sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed and ready to start the day. Nothing had changed since I was a child, I could sleep through vacuuming under my bed, clanging noises in the kitchen, trains in the night and roosters but the perfume was always too strong for me. The olfactory

sense is deemed to be the most ancient sense; it helps us find and identify food and potential partners and alerts us to dangers and enemies (Sarafoleanu et al., 2009). I tried to imagine what it was like for my ancestors living in the desert before the prospectors and pastoralists arrived. Their human senses would have been keenly and vitally tuned to the environment because they were not separate from it. They were of the earth, rose from the earth and possessed the ancient knowledge of the earth. They travelled great distances following the delicate seasonal supply of foods available and water sources. I was hoping to glean this life before the white man came, when travel was fleet footed across the desert earth of sand, stone and spinifex. Where the sun was lethal, and the rains caused instant floods. I wanted to discover the tracks they made and see the animals and vegetation they used for food.

Image of *Wardaman Women Carrying Water in Bark Containers* removed for Indigenous cultural reasons. The cultural owners are the Wardaman people, Northern Territory, Australia.

Figure 13. *Wardaman Women Carrying Water in Bark Containers*, Northern Territory. Photograph by Herbert Basedow, 1922.

Note: From *The Aboriginal Australian*, second edition, by H. Basedow, 2012, compiled and edited by D. M. Welch, pp. ii–iii (http://davidmwelch.com.au/Books/Basedow_Aboriginal.html).

Winding down the soft track towards the creek bed, I knew the energy contained there would eventually reveal something. For at least 35 years the influence of human bodies had made their mark on the sandy earth, the trees and the stones. Fires and gleeful noises from the children and the distant sounds of a language unique to the desert tribes would have been heard—now there was nothing, no Aboriginal people, no desert language, no culture, just white man’s cattle industry. My mother’s first steps were here on this place and perhaps in the very spot where we were. Now having to use assistance when walking, she was still spirited, but the irony of increasingly limited footsteps I found disheartening and hard to reconcile. Again, I set her wheelchair in the centre of the creek bed; she found it exhilarating to be there and began to take photos with her point-and-shoot camera. Rain had fallen, and the musty sweet smell of the foliage and damp, red dirt filled the air. I had numerous small copper plates, which I began to position up and down the creek bed, while my mother kept asking what I was doing—“just art”, I would reply, which was easily accepted. I recorded the plates with my camera’s video function, trying to remember where I positioned all of them. The wind was really blowing through the trees now as I attempted to film very slowly, going through the grasses close to the ground so that my lens brushed by the blades like the cinematic effects I had seen in the film *Sweet Country* (Thornton, 2018). Thornton wanted to recreate the sensations of life as it was on the newly found pastoral back country in the 1920s by filming everything at eye level instead of engaging modern filming equipment such as drones. Filming as if one is walking through the long grass with the camera at that height has an immediate effect upon the senses and renders an experience of being there. It also heightens one’s awareness to the details of plants and the earth.

I scratched the smallest plates, having to find them first. Placing one stone on each plate I traced around the stone with my etching tool. I scratched on the other side of the plate, completing seven plates along with the sound of the breeze and the background warble of the birds with an occasional squawk and whistle. Walking with the stones and rocks underfoot, I was awakened to the events that happened at Wongawol when my mother was just over a year old. There were no memories; I had to find them and piece them together from the records [4] over years and years of

research. On the surface, nothing remained, or else I had not yet developed eyes for seeing the past. The rocks in the creek bed were all new, the old ones having been washed downstream over the years and smashed. The wind was a new wind and the air I breathed was new, all enveloped by a time gone; but I dug it up, scratched it into a tangible existence to reveal its secrets and in doing so I continued my ancestors' spiritual journey. As Ingold (2010) describes the Australian Yolngu people as having no text but completely embodying and living their own paintings, I too hoped I could achieve this with my etchings. Birds were now singing in unison but a distance away, parrots were dancing on the fat white trunk of the river gum, their tails pointing down pretending to hide, not revealing themselves, green feathers against the white trunk. One flew off after poking its head out, but I could still hear them. I collected the copper plates and found others I had placed over by the river gum and wondered how many more I had missed and how they would now be washed away with the next torrential rains merging with the rhythms of Wongawol.

I studied the geological survey maps to see if I could work out the local coordinates but they made no sense to me, so I put the rocks I used to trace around in a bag and collected some desert sand for use in my canvas paintings. I was keen to go to the water holes because these points would have been places of rest and temporary camping sites for the tribes over the ages. There were artists who used strict mathematical recipes to do art and walking projects, such as Domenico de Clario (2017) who walked the Murray River for one hundred days recording one word each day, which he then configured numerically and performed on a keyboard (Stephens, 2015). I was temporarily seduced by this idea, but in my ancestors' country it was clear it had no relevance, and experimenting with numbers and coordinates had the effect of taking me out of an embodied experience. We could not find the track branching off the Gunbarrel Highway [5] to Benstead Lagoon. Eventually, I spotted a faint track leading over a small ridge; we turned onto it heading south, going past the tektites—small meteorites, black, flat and shiny. The rock formations covering the land were stunning; there was no need to arrange them because they looked like someone had already done so—black, silky earth with tiny black rocks peppered everywhere. We travelled for some time along an old fence line. In parts the track was rough with

jagged rocks forming the track. Rains had caused erosion and it was hard to see where we had to veer right. I asked the owner who was unsure, so we stopped at a steep part of the creek and got out and walked. Leaving my mother in the car, we gave her instructions that if we had not returned by a certain time to start sounding the horn.

The land was covered in grasses because water was near, and there were terracotta- and ochre-coloured breakaways forming perfect water channels down to the invisible pool. River gums created a cooling environment in meandering strips as the multitude of streams made their way to the lowest ground. Cattle were now in sight making their cow noises; I was ready to turn back because bush cattle are extremely curious, and some will attack anything. We did not find the pool, and after a speedy walk back to the car we set off towards the patch of black earth and tiny meteorites where I walked at a very slow pace and closely examined the rock formations. I wondered how stones could be so perfectly placed by nature, creating configurations and organic sculptures so pleasing to the eye. One did not have to walk too far before being in the centre of a masterpiece. I did not touch the stones and rocks but instead needed to absorb nature's display. The sun was getting low in the sky, which created the most interesting shadows on the silver-black ground. The angular shapes of the larger rocks contrasted with the tiny pebbles that blanketed the earth like the undercoat of a Twombly (Bastian, 1992) painting, seemingly random but perfectly placed. I became curious about the shapes and shadows of the rocks, bending low to examine the patterned shards that had split off from some rocks lying flat to the ground with deep-coloured earth compacted around their edges, baffled as to how nature created this. Some patterns looked like an entire rock had been pulverised into varying sizes of flat, angular shapes that left an impression of the original rock, like the discovery of dinosaur bones once the flesh and organs had fallen away.

Back at the homestead I picked fresh basil and a chilli from the vegetable garden to make pasta on the great stove in the mustering quarters. As I walked the distance to the dining hall, the manager suddenly entered through the homestead perimeter from being on a water mill run [6], which is just one of the many tasks necessary to run a station over vast tracks of land that covers a million acres. I wanted

to go to all the water points, the windmills, yards and pools because these points would indicate the ancient tracks of the Indigenous desert people and my ancestors over time that is unimaginable to the Western mind. I wondered what the Indigenous names for these places might have been since they had mostly been renamed by the white settlers now, erasing even the sounds of a language from these parts. The erasure seemed complete; on the surface there was no visible evidence of Indigenous habitation, no people, no language, no culture. Even the land itself felt like it had been Westernised, with mostly cattle, horses, roads, trucks and station equipment the order of the day. I was going to have to take the descriptions in the files and apply an apt amount of imagination and visualisation to bring up the story from the earth beneath my feet. By my walking these places and creating art at the same time, my intention was to bring forth an energy from the past that might form a tangible trace or lead to a glimmer of linkages that could start to form a picture of the happenings of Wongawol when its natural inhabitants were here. Gaston Bachelard (1964) writes that muscular consciousness incorporates into the body memory the walking of repetitive daily life and that surfaces, scents, shapes and seasonal changes are imprinted at a physical and sensory level. These imprints, via the act of walking, are informed by thousands of nuanced, spatial and sensorial actions through time and space.

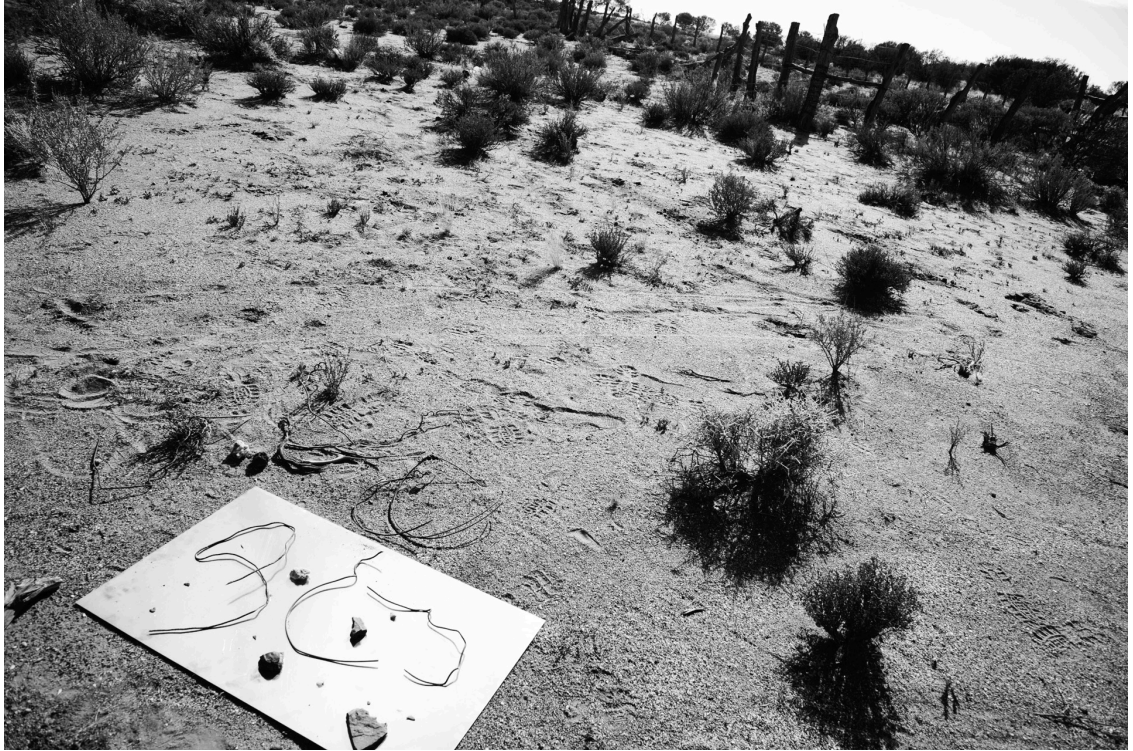


Figure 14. Copper etching plate with stones and wire at Dawson's round yards.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2018.

We arrived at Dawson's, many miles from the homestead. There was an old set of horse round yards here, with wire twisted and broken and grey, and weathered wooden posts leaning from the soft, red sand supported only by slack wire in some parts. The colours of the grasses were of wheat, contrasted with grey wavy lines of the posts and the deep red stones. It seemed to be out in the open where horses were corralled a long time ago, silent now in its demise, but would have seen a violence of activity in its working days. I studied the posts and wire and tried to gauge the original shape of the yards, but they were a ruin now with just part of a section visible. I photographed the yards in a harsh overhead light, washed out by the light blue air and relentless desert sun. I could not feel water here and wondered why they were positioned here at all. I fetched a large rectangular copper plate and placed it on the ground, wondering what to do with it. After some time walking around the area, I felt a disjoint. Normally, I would spend at least half a day at a place before I could feel a strong connection to be able to embark on any artwork but because of the remoteness, I was not afforded this amount of time and so preparatory work had to

suffice. I started to gather wire lying on the ground and randomly selected stones to place on the plate before tracing around them with an etching tool. It occurred to me that I was recording place or making a map of some kind, but I was also acknowledging a past energy that seemed dormant now, a salvaging of something I was unable to fully understand yet.

Meandering through the desert scrub on a seldom used track we entered a plentiful area with long, yellow grass up to my knees. There was a clearing as we came through a grove of trees, and beyond in the centre of the clearing was another set of round yards originally used when the station supplied horses for the great wars and the horse and coach transportation firm Cobb & Co. This was indeed a beautiful place, with old, weathered wood in long clumps of grass, the wind blowing and whistling through the clearing. A bronco yard [7] was still standing, but no one on the station knew the early history of the station when my people had been working Wongawol and would have worked these yards. I felt an immediate connection to this place, moving through the long grass, crouching down to the level of the grass flower tips as I approached the yards. There was a familiarity and nurturing feeling here, and I could sense water was nearby, indicated by the larger and denser trees circling the clearing. I imagined a resting place here where native animals would have been a food source for the travelling tribes, all drawn to the water source not far from here.

This place was given the name Aqua Springs. I filmed as I walked through the long grass trying to capture a sense of the movement of brushing past the blades of grass, a slowing down of experience and seeing it from a different perspective. Again, I was influenced by Thornton's (2018) heightened cinematography but also by Raban (1978), who made films to deliberately disrupt ordinary habitual ways of seeing by employing different camera positions to imprint upon the viewer the sensations of one's surroundings.

We came over a small, long ridge to a place called Jewill Lagoon, a vast expanse of lake but quite dried up except for the middle, with clumps of drying and cracked mud in different stages depending how close or far from the remaining water one walked. The sky was overcast, and rain had just fallen; small birds were sitting on top

of the water and autumn colours radiated out along the ground towards the edge of the clay. The breeze was strong. I walked towards the water as far as the mud would allow before becoming stuck. We had now left the boundary of Wongawol and had entered Niminga Station through the back way as we followed the mustering tracks. I wondered if we were on an ancient Aboriginal track that linked water holes over vast distances and realised that perhaps spatial awareness could be limited greatly by Western thinking about maps, boundaries and ideas of ownership. I wondered how the Western blueprint for these lands compared with the Aboriginal tribal sense of demarcations and if there were physical signs to signal to others if one was entering the edge of someone's tribal lands. The mustering track we followed made a big arc from the main track through Kipillon Spring, Jublejarrah Pool to Jewill Lagoon and Aqua Springs. We then headed through some dry country towards Jilga Downs where we stopped to explore what looked to be an old prospectors' camp. From my experience in the goldfields while working with my father, I suspected the camp was a digging and probably for gold. Much of the tin structure from the camp was still there; though the structures were now collapsed and resting closer to the ground. This camp was extremely remote, and I wondered what man would exist out here except those with a hunger and quest for gold.

I picked up some old, flattened lids from food tins and examined the blacksmithing of the water tank and other items with rusted rivets holding steel seams together, imagining the strength and skill required to make wheels for the camel carts, fence post splitters, water tanks and all kinds of things essential for desert life as an early pastoralist. Finding a suitable place to dig a well was often the first requirement in these parts and Aboriginal knowledge of water sources would have been paramount for this undertaking. I surmised that out here water sources and human-made wells would have had more value than gold. Swinging back toward the main track, we passed Mt Moore bore, Goongarrie bore and Lake Augusta Well before arriving at Niminga Well, which is a particularly old well. Three turtles live in the bottom of the wooden well, but they dived down into the clear dark water as we spoke and we could not see them. It was a mess, with debris strewn around the well, old tin, pipe, blocks of cement and broken wood, with two unsightly black plastic water tanks now standing

where the old windmill once was. Old mulga tree posts horizontally lined the original well with a much newer windmill now sitting next to it. Unlike Aqua Springs, this well exuded a menacing energy that I could not understand except to conclude that the place did not convey a resting place and was probably a watering hole for cattle and horses. Niminga Well is right next to the road heading north to Carnegie Station, or in the opposite direction back to Wongawol. We turned south to Mingol Pool, a permanent water hole on the main track, which I had visited the year before. Green, musky white river gums were growing out of red banks against the green–white water; leaves had fallen everywhere on the edge of the banks, and square flagstones lay at a spot where a shelter must have existed. This was a significant Aboriginal resting place with its large water supply and native animals coming in to drink from the pool in times gone by.



Figure 15. Mingol Pool, Wongawol Station—permanent water hole.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2018.

There is a bough shed near the bank, which my mother made her way to, an old mulga slab table, benches and a makeshift cooking area more for day travellers now than any kind of permanent living. The wind was scrapping across the water, resonating through my belly, and the sounds of birds could be heard in the background. The moment was broken by the sound of a man's voice as he rose from the bottom of the bank asking, "What brings you ladies here?"—an odd question since we were with the owner and manager of the station, which he was surprised to learn since we were four relaxed women and an eight-month baby girl in the middle of the Western Desert. His mate had three flat tyres and was unprepared for desert travel with town tyres. They were stuck at Mingol Pool unless we could help them. It was decided his mate would follow us back to Wongawol to acquire some old tyres—his only option—in the hope that he would not have another flat on the way back to the station. The manager waved me on to lead as we were in two vehicles; she followed me so she could check he was still following our convoy back to Wongawol. The landscape was stunning; the good road allowed a fast speed; undulations revealed

grand vistas into the distance, into the never-ending horizon; the road turned ochre white with calcium rising to the surface, then it turned red and gunmetal grey. I was so glad that my mother was travelling the ancient tracks that her people had traversed for thousands of years. A kangaroo and her joey crossed our path, and suddenly a large gathering of eagles eating a dead dog on the side of the road loomed before us. With their thick, feathered legs they struck me first like sentinels on the edge of a Dreamtime obscured by the erasure of Indigenous culture in these parts. One lifted into the air and glided with wings fully spread just below the bonnet of my car and then rose up to fix its glare at us before flying over the contours of my front window screen.

Eventually, on the second attempt we reached Benstead Lagoon. My mother in tow, we travelled over a rough road made of sharp rocks and eroded gullies. When we reached a steep riverbed some speed helped us through the soft sand to the other side. A bush turkey crossed the track and not far behind was her partner. I managed to photograph them before they flew away. The lagoon was vast, with gentle edges almost flat to the water, cattle were drinking from the muddy banks and there were butcherbirds, ibis and wild ducks. My mother leaned up against the car surveying the scene before her while I walked the perimeter of the water's edge looking for inspiration to etch my copper plate. I found the intricate roots of a tree lying on its side, a tangle of a thousand lines spreading out in a fan shape to reveal its deadness. I scratched both sides of the plate and took black and white close-ups of the tree with my Hasselblad medium format camera. Further on, Bummers Pool was spectacular, clear and deep with violent piles of tree roots, logs and debris from the convergence of two water ways coming to rest in the pool. I spent a long time in a section where the water swirled to create a mess of trees and twigs above a quiet pool of crystal-clear water. A tiny black bird befriended me. Looking back I could see my mother and the others sitting and talking, resembling an old scene from the early days on the station. The white river gums were thick around the edge of the pool and there was a sense of melancholy as I imagined a time when my ancestors' voices would be heard softly in the distance attending to their children while gathering and preparing food for the day.

As we wandered in the Western Desert, I noticed the manager closely inspecting certain bushes. She had been recruited by the government to monitor native plants for degradation that was due to climatic factors and grazing by introduced animals. I found this highly interesting and read the entire manual on arid plants (Mitchell & Wilcox, 2014) when I returned to the homestead and learned that cattle have a penchant for Sturt Pea, a stunning ski-shaped, fire-engine-red native flower with a black lumpy eye in the centre of its elongated shape. It creeps along the ground throwing up its vertical flowers contrasting with the terracotta earth.

My interest now expanded to the detail of all plants and I began to take very close shots with my Nikon camera of all the plants around the homestead, particularly the numerous types of grasses. I took a sprig of each and pressed them between the pages of a Moleskine with acute appreciation of the delicate species that battle to survive in this harsh environment and thought these books of grasses and flowers were beautiful art pieces in themselves, although I was no botanist and my record keeping was haphazard. I developed a strong liking for the desert grasses, mostly because of their fine, whimsical lines and small, unobtrusive flower heads—wind grass, ribbon grass, limestone grass and windmill grass (Mitchell & Wilcox, 2014), to name a few. People on the station were generally unaware of the variety of the species of grasses here and it seemed to me there was a whole world of layers that constituted the ancient desert lands that had been overlooked. We all keenly flipped through the manual absorbing the revelations of flora that were right before our eyes, but we needed new information and new eyes to be able to see it. How easy we “forget a disappeared environment” (Cameron, 1997, as cited in Chinna, 2014, p. 11) and the deep stories of the earth and its people that are buried in our forgetting.

I found some fencing wire at the newest old dump some distance from the homestead. As I collected it, a baby magpie landed onto the roof of my vehicle and kept slipping down the front windscreen playfully until it saw me and let out a piercing screech, which set off other birds with different bird sounds. The exchange was different from anything I had ever encountered since we were both in our own worlds, and when we frightened each other the baby magpie’s screech communicated something strong within me. The roads were closed because of rains, which meant we

could not leave the station, and I rejoiced at being able to stay longer. I gathered my Japanese handmade paper and went to the old homestead to do wall rubbings with 9B graphite. Now, I could take some time to read the script of over a hundred years of habitation, the scratches and gouges of candlelit nights with soft voices relaying stories of the day's work, of easy and complicated relationships, of sorrow and sickness and the joyful squeals of children born to white fathers and Aboriginal women, oblivious to the newest racial deprivations of liberty that had befallen the rest of the land (government files, personal communications, 2019). On these scribed walls of the old homestead I was reading a long book that I was unable to understand, a coded time of happenings and emotions that were now manifested by a scratch in stucco; a hand tool and the earth of the walls held all the secrets. I took rubbings of the secrets contained by the depressions, the absences, a tiny infinite chasm that became such by the faint imprint of its edge—its only certainty. Someone had managed to get through on the closed road, so we packed up and set off in the same direction homeward. I followed exactly in their tyre tracks, making a double imprint in the earth's red skin.

My head was swimming with ideas when I returned home. I needed to immerse myself in the objects of desert culture, of the life and items that have disappeared as there is so little recorded about these parts because of its remoteness. By misfortune or chance, it seems, no early anthropologists had come through Wongawol, and the missionaries were some distance away at Mt Margaret, way south of the station. I needed to make replicas of objects used for everyday living, such as water carrying bowls, which struck a chord with me as a metaphor for life, woman, sustenance and crucible of knowledge. I began to source archival photographs of early life in the Western Desert upon first contact with white people to learn what they made for survival and took note of their garb and body adornment, such as scarification, ceremonial ochre body painting, use of bird feathers, string, seeds and other desert paraphernalia. I was struck by the way Giacometti (Fontanella & Vail, 2018) could depict the essence of a person with clay and through his obsession with working with the material created something beyond the ordinary. I thought I could bring forth the essence of my ancestors' lives, how they lived and what objects they used by hand building with clay, or at the very least, it would enable me to enter that

world through a process of contemplative making. I began making small bowls in the shape I had seen in the archival photograph via pinch pots and then graduated to larger bowls, becoming aware of the properties of different clays and how they respond to one's hand. I also became aware of aesthetic and spatial qualities and learned how to make with a strong personal signature through an emphasis on the haptic. Simultaneously, I was branching out into photolithography as an immersive repetition process using archival photographs that I could gather from anywhere, and all the while I continued to print the copper plates of objects and lines I had scratched in situ, closely resembling a kind of map making, the outcomes unknown.

THREE—SEPTEMBER '19

*She said they were useless, the natives I mean.
Didn't work and caused no end of trouble.
I lost my focus,
Stones lost, stones found,
The stones are talking.*

(Cim Sears, 2020)

Trying to find pink coolant outside the city on a Sunday is almost impossible. Fortunately, I bought all three bottles available at Ginger's petrol station just up the road from Midland Junction and filled the coolant reservoir, but it kept going down. Nothing was going to prevent me from getting to the station so I headed off with worry, knowing every time I stopped, I would have to check the coolant level. Diluting it with distilled water to ration the supply, we headed on up the long road. Much had happened since my last field trip. I had printed hundreds of photolithographs of archival Western Desert images of Aboriginal inhabitants, researched Aboriginal artefact collections housed all over the world and embarked on an inquiry into how to identify artefacts. A chance meeting with anthropologists who had extensive knowledge of the Western Desert tribes stimulated this enquiry. There was an urgency to learn how to recognise artefacts. I had been completely blind to the art of identifying them, and I could not believe my decades of ignorance. Finally, my eyes were beginning to see, but I could not fathom why I had only just come to this

realisation. I did think I had found a large grinding stone on the second visit to Wongawol, but it was in fact from the bottom of the ocean floor, when billions of years ago this desert was an inland shallow sea. My friend, who was coming as my assistant to photograph and help install my art pieces on the station, and I were in convoy with the owner of the station and had arranged to meet at Ginger's before heading into the desert country. After an entire day of driving, we stopped at Meekatharra for the night. The coolant was down again, and with heightened concern I refilled as we booked into the Commercial Hotel and showered before going to the bar for a beer.

The motel room was like years ago when I had worked here as a laboratory assistant in the mid-1970s—same smell, squeaky flywire door, wonky curtains, tiny bathroom with worn-through pink dusty towels and a 1970s bedcover. There was much conversation over a meal of fish and chips and salad in the impressive hotel dining room with deep crimson carpet and high pressed-tin ceilings. The subject of my ancestor who founded the station came up because he loomed as a highly controversial figure surrounded by plenty of intrigue and mystery. The famous story of him killing many people always surfaced, but there were no official records that stated this or even alluded to it, so it was a mystery how this story had taken hold in the first place or in fact if there was any truth to it. Those who told the story never seemed to question its validity and usually told it with great enthusiasm as if it were a historical fact. I rose early the next morning to check the coolant and it was down again. On our way out of town I stopped at the corner fuel station to enquire whether they had any, only green coolant. A truck driver asked about my predicament and informed me that if the engine was using it, then it was a real problem, but if it was a leak then I was to use what coolant I had with distilled water, which I already knew. We headed off in convoy along the 250 kilometres of red dirt road to Wiluna where we eventually pulled up to the general store and fuel pump, and once again I had forgotten how to use the card-only bowser. An Aboriginal woman came over to help me with a detailed version of the operating instructions and I managed to fill the tank and the spare yellow fuel containers for the long journey into remote lands. In the town, the scene was one of deep divide; in fact, I did not see white people walking or milling about anywhere.

They were behind the counters employed or in high visibility gear working for the mines. The Aboriginal people were all about, and at intervals colourful waves of families would appear over the bitumen rise, walking in from the reserve site as if in a parallel world where their inclusion seemed one of charitable national tolerance and a government carrying out its duty of care, even though they had been here for thousands of years.

This time we sped straight past Yelma and the creek where jasper stone can be seen. It disturbed me to be in such a hurry, but I intended to return. We arrived at Wongawol with the usual animated greetings, lots of talk over cups of tea with the new managers about station life and the journey here. Mustering meant that new people were always coming and going but the awkwardness of meeting the new managers was laced with the hope that they would be happy for my presence. After unloading the fresh food supplies, we settled into the mustering quarters and then strolled over to the old homestead to check the state of the place for my installation of artworks. Mustering had just finished, and the team had moved up to Carnegie Station, which is the last station before extremely remote Aboriginal lands. The mustering cooking gear was in the living room—large fire-blackened cast-iron pots with handles, ladles and over-sized kettles—which I positioned in the old stone fire place and then set about moving two small fridges out to another room. There were three small, wire benches of sorts, which I left, and an old cyclone fence wire bed leaning up against the graffiti wall. The two single lounge chairs remained either side of the fireplace. In the kitchen, most of the items had been cleared out, making it a good space to install some of my works. I began to visualise what I would hang and which pieces of ceramics I wanted on the flagstone floor. Bringing the works to the station and placing them in situ meant they could be imbued with the spirit of Wongawol. I now had a strong bond with the place, and the works needed to be steeped in the same elements of wind, dirt, sun and the sounds of Wongawol. I was writing script upon this land with my own body, and it was essential that my work contained the same celestial presence and in turn that the land wrote script upon me and therefore my works (de Certeau, 2008).

I had collected stones on my first trip with little knowledge or discernment, and a few on my second trip as they began to feature more in my subconscious; by now the stones were beginning to speak to me. They contained stories and I needed to learn how to read them. Research into the whereabouts of Aboriginal artefacts strewn throughout the world, the works of landscape artists like Richard Long (2005), the reworking of archival images by Brook Andrew (2013) and dialogue with expert anthropologists enabled me to enter a deeper level of understanding about life on Wongawol before the prospectors and pastoralists arrived. I decided to create stone formations of my own as homage to the Indigenous tribes here and a way to enter the world of ancient cultural dreaming. It was a kind of blind intention since I knew little of the cultural practices or Dreamtime stories of my ancestors: an indication that the erasure of the people of this land had been so devastatingly complete. Threads were beginning to form like fine gossamer faintly detected against the clear absence of history, a delicate web forming potential links that could finally be gleaned. Using stones I found near the old homestead, Boogoodoo, I made a cairn with an upright stone in the centre like an obelisk. It seemed to me these stones had been part of the homestead at some point because they resembled the same quarry stones with perfect edges in oblong shapes that constituted the homestead. I thought I would face the stones eastward into the rising sun and the direction the people had walked when they came in from the far-flung desert. I did not really know what I was creating and it did seem a little strange, but looking for the stones caused me to sink into an immersive process so that purpose formed around the action, which could have been a memorial to the past or a signal of becoming and moving into the future. What I did not know at the time was that I was constructing these stones on the place that my aunty and her children had slept when it was an enclosed bough shed attached to the eastern side of Boogoodoo [1]. They sometimes slept in the body of a truck housed under the structure, which indicated the elevated position she and her children experienced in the life of Wongawol.



Figure 16. Stone formation I created on the east side of Boogoodoo, Wongawol Station.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2019.

Their little dark bodies were curled up asleep in the truck's cabin when the police raid occurred on the fateful morning in 1935 when the history of Wongawol changed forever. The dawn air filled with violent dust from the lurching vehicles during the mayhem that befell the people of Wongawol, who had become the prime target of government-initiated laws prohibiting mixed race cohabitation and the supply of alcohol to Aboriginals (South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council, 2020), as if the Indigenous population were deemed imbecilic and incapable of making their own decisions. As it turned out, the laws of cohabitation were hard to enact since practically every white man engaged in it, including those in authority, and no one admitted to the allegation [2]. The law of forbidding the supply of alcohol badly ensnared both blacks and whites in a cycle of legal pettiness since the laws were mainly devised by self-proclaimed, righteous and often heavily religious advisors to the legislators of the day [3]. How apt that my obelisk rock formation marked the spot signifying the loss of liberty and destruction of families at Wongawol, because here marked a memorial or acknowledgement to lives wiped from history. Their names were changed on the day of the raid by the government, and they were transported to

different places far from their home. Not far from here, my ancestor's Dreamtime story of the plains kangaroo (marlu) and the hill kangaroo (pikuda) is signified by a standing stone that looks over a vast land of white trunk desert trees towards a mesa (Macintyre, 1992-1996). The stones are yellow and burnt orange ochre in colour, smashed, whole and all shapes, with a large clearing made around the standing stone from time immemorial. Macintyre's photographs and field notes classify this site as being "Marlu Tjukurrpa" (1992-1996), Kangaroo Dreaming, significant for the concept of increase, plentiful and continued creation of kangaroos as the main source of food for the local desert tribes. I wondered how many thousands of years ceremony took place here and who danced, painted their bodies and sang the spirit songs that connected them to land. All has gone, and the people have become separated from their own history.

I became distracted because the talk by others gathering around me was about how dreadful the Aboriginal people were and how evil my white ancestor was who owned the station. I avoided speaking because I was sure a lot of the angst was due to the years of battle over native title [4], and now there was suddenly a renewed push for "Reconsideration of Claim" [5], which had caused a good deal of concern for all the station owners around these parts. Any conversation about land rights and native title was going to be fraught with high emotions, cancelling out any useful discussion or assessment of the facts. As my frustration grew, I shut the conversation out and continued to place my pit-fired ceramic vessels on the old wooden bench in the blacksmith shed where saddles were made and steel was forged. A place forgotten now, it was being used to store found horseshoes and discarded bed mattresses. I noticed remnants of old saddles, an early leather bench cutter and steel rings from the mouth pieces of horses or maybe camels from many years ago. I arranged my black ceramic vessels on the flagstone floor of Boogoodoo, but the conversation continued about Aboriginals and native title and I was unable to enter any sort of creative space to deal with my artwork, so I went to the mustering kitchen and made a large avocado salad with almost nothing but avocados that I had brought to the station, marking poetically, my presence in this desert. A huge, long wooden box was found to use as a sign for my exhibition at Wongawol. I outlined the words in graphite and the station

owner found some old black paint in the workshop where all the mustering vehicles are mechanically repaired after each muster, and she filled in the lines 'Art Exhibition Sept 28th' with a large, black arrow pointing the way to the station.



Figure 17. My exhibition sign, 2019, Wongawol Road, WA.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2019.

The black ceramic vessels were out of place in the homestead, so I packed them up and took them over to the old round yards outside the station. The sun was hot and high overhead. Careful not to put footprints on the dirt around them, I placed the vessels on a small patch of stones with a rise in the land leading southward, fossicking; things were still not right. Walking and watching the stones, I could not focus my eyes. I was looking for signs of life gone by, kicking the stones over, finding remnants of horse shoes, old wire and rusted iron, but it was a race to find something and I did not intend this to be. Someone's shoe prints near every stone became distracting and I could not concentrate. Again, talk of my history but I'm not doing the

talking, lolling along on the red dirt swaying this way and that, eyes scouring the surface as others' were also, in some sort of fraught activity of finders-keepers.

Blast it, I could not sleep because I was waiting for 5 am when the truck was coming to pick up the calves who had been crying through the night. The darkness was disappearing when I strolled over to see the dust in the approaching dawn kicked up by the wheels of the truck and the calves' hooves, the colours degrees of peach against a rising sun not yet breaching the horizon. After breakfast, I hung the large photographs I had taken the year before with my Hasselblad medium format camera in the mustering kitchen, black and white close-ups mainly of Wongawol's grasses, tangled tree roots and water holes. Later, I took my large etchings over to Boogoodoo and started planning where to hang them, laying the folio on a tarpaulin in the old kitchen to minimise the red dirt infiltrating my works. I had collected remnants of wire from the round yard the day before to use as hanging gear, which I positioned with a handmade hook from the same wire, dropping them from the horizontal structures of the corrugated tin walls of the homestead. Art pieces in themselves, their weathered steel was forged long ago, thick and thin pieces of looped wire and knots where they had been twisted to bring the tension tight between the mulga tree posts that formed the round yard. All was in ruins now since generations had used the historical yards for firewood, and only the upright posts remained, with the sculptural strewn cut wire on the ground.

The station owner showed me a copy of my great grandfather's birth certificate, or perhaps it was his death certificate, since she had been gathering the white history of Wongawol over many years but had found little information earlier than the 1950s. It felt odd that others knew part of my heritage and I did not. The story that he had been orphaned as a child, was a pauper and an evil man had gathered magical momentum over many decades, but there was no evidence for any of these attributes and in fact I was beginning to find that some of these stories could be refuted by research I was conducting on his early life [6]. I found he grew up in Northampton, inherited tracts of land from his father in the soil-rich Victoria district there, was a bullock teamster at some stage and had met his business partner prospecting. With substantial resources he established Wongawol and other stations,

sparing nothing on acquiring the best equipment and farming practices available at the time. Returning to my artwork, I determined that my faded etchings looked better in Boogoodoo against the aging tin and stone walls. The early storyboard pieces of text, graphite, acrylic and collage came alive in the living room against the etched walls of faded mint stucco. I was able to use a diagonal wire that stretched the length of the room high above my head to loop wire from the yards and then with bull clips hang two large pieces of Japanese handmade Kozo paper with images of my text and collages of the station. They gently swayed in the afternoon breeze, back to back, looping on themselves, reflecting the script and graffiti on the walls. As I strolled back from the main kitchen, I saw hundreds of small pieces of glass a few metres from Boogoodoo. I imagined the ancestors chipping away at old bottles to make spear heads and cutting tools, a kaleidoscope of coloured glass left behind in tiny chips.

I returned to the creek where jasper could be found. The pools of water had evaporated because of the drought. To the west, the creek bed consisted of coarse granules of sand, deep sloping holes had been dug by animals to reveal small pools of life-saving water beneath the ground. At intervals, small pieces of jasper appeared. Bent over and straining my eyes, I found focusing and visually sweeping large areas at the same time exhausting. In the distance a cow stood perfectly still in the cut of the river with its gaze unwaveringly fixed upon me. At some point, it turned into a lithe desert tribal woman looking back at me from a distant past, beckoning me to walk the path of a dreaming I did not understand. She stayed for a long time. I went back to searching for jasper, and when I looked up, she was still there, gaze still fixed on me waiting in the stillness of an ancient lore. Her intensity had communicated something deep within me, although I was unsure how to describe what that was. I picked up a piece of red ochre that had come from higher ground, washed down by the wild creek in the summer months. I walked east where the jasper pieces were much larger, like little chunks of rainbow cake, and I came across fossils of ancient jellyfish or perhaps sea creatures. A round quartz stone stood out against the rest, fitting perfectly in the palm of my hand, and I wondered how it came to be here. I detected pitted marks on one side like those of a banging stone and thought perhaps this was a significant

resting place for the desert tribes who made tools from the creek stones and the high country a little further upstream.

The creek was welcoming. I looked down the west direction where there was nothing but rocks upon rocks and stones everywhere. I knew I could go there. The great white river gum reached far over me to keep me cool, and the path in the creek beckoned over fossils, jasper and quartz to a dreaming beyond a hundred years of colonial destruction, beyond the sad, erased but still present history. I was reminded of Derrida's (2008) notion that trace is not linear but a simulacrum of a dislocation and disruption, continually folding and unfolding, and constantly interweaving and referring beyond itself, and I wondered if I had become a little part of the omnipotent desert tapestry.

Strong tea in a large green enamel mug and granola marked the start of the morning, before I went over to Boogoodoo to see what etchings I would hang in the old kitchen. Red ceramic beads threaded on the finer wire provided a touch of the colour of blood, the little pieces of wire scratching and twisting in organic forms against the tin walls. An enormous wind came in from the north, whipping the etchings around on the wires and covering everything with grit. I removed the etchings before they were destroyed, wiped them with my shirt and hoped Saturday, the day of the exhibition, would be less windy. I tested my ceramic vessels again in the blacksmith shed on the great wooden bench with the red beads and small photographs of archival images and text. The desert wind did not enter through the door opening so ferociously because it faced west. I spent a long time arranging the pieces and selecting images and text relevant to the time when only Indigenous people were here. After a trial run placing my artist books in the living room of Boogoodoo, I felt the effects of the mad north wind, becoming parched and in much need of a drink. Later, we headed out towards Benstead to find the pink gate as that is where the tektites could be found. We travelled north along the Gunbarrel Highway looking for the faint track that veered off to the south marked by the old broken fence line. Eventually, we came upon the place, but the gate was no longer there. Stopping a little way up I began scouring the ground for tektites but found nothing that resembled them so I walked west back towards where I thought the old pink gate might have

been to try my luck there. The ground was hard rust-red with many smooth black stones evenly spaced among sparse desert shrubs and a tree here and there. I collected a few of the black molten stones, not at all certain they were tektites, but they seemed to be unique to this place. I was walking deeper into the desert so I found a long branch, tied a colourful shirt to one end and positioned it vertically on top of my vehicle so that I had a landmark to keep in sight as I wandered further away.

I went past the place of the missing pink gate and found a small chip of jasper. The rock formations were beautiful as I walked with head lower, closer to the ground and eyes straining to see small black circles of rock that might be a tektite. While looking, I began building a stone formation of a circle with stones piled in the middle, not too elaborate because I was distracted by trying to find tektites. I used long angular rocks, which were burning hot to pick up, so I quickly scooped them up and put them under my arm, my skin protected by my shirt. I came across a small patch of tiny black stones, so small they were hard to gather, and I wondered what it had been like during the impact of meteoric rocks and how they might have shattered on hitting the earth. Or, in the case of tektites, what had happened to them as they hurtled through the earth's atmosphere before landing in the desert with their circular mushroom shapes. I completed my round rock formation and wondered what it meant, what its significance was and why I had chosen this place. I imagined it was near the track that had brought the Aboriginal people and my ancestors in from the distant desert to the east in times of drought. I thought it contained an energy that was magnified by the knowledge of it being a meteoric stone landing place in its blackness and glassy reflection, and it was close to the natural stone formations that I had seen a little way off that seemed to contain deep ancient knowledge. I was tired from all the searching, so back at the homestead I lay down. Looking at my book, I drifted off in a smooth swirl of magnificence that the desert had presented to me.



Figure 18. My ceramic vessels situated near the old round yards, Wongawol Station.

Note: Photograph by Cim Sears, 2019.

I noticed a grey, fine patch of earth near the north-west corner of the old homestead and remembered from the early photograph of the building that there had been an open fireplace in the same spot, so I began to move the earth and discovered that it was in fact an old fire pit. I wondered if I would find artefacts. Digging deeper and deeper I thought I was going downwards in history to a time when my people sat around the fire speaking the whispered sounds of language, telling stories of infinitude and preparing food. I dug through grey ash to uncover remnants of old green and purple glass bottles, pieces of porcelain and tiny bits of charred bone. I thought the circle of the fire symbolised the womb of the earth, the giver of life and a sacred space signalling notions of abundance, plenty and nurturing.

My black ceramic vessels were still touching the earth under blue skies on the patch of stones near the round yard. They remained through the lonely black nights covered in stars near the narrow cattle paths and desert shrubland. I laid on my belly

flat to the ground and photographed them with the sun low to the horizon when the earth turns fire red. The desert wind in its dance had picked up fine desert sand and placed small quantities in the base of the vessels. There was now a sense of reverence surrounding them that I could not quite explain. I felt satisfied that they had become part of this setting, having sprung from my imagination and been crafted far from here. The sands remained in the vessels when I transported them and placed them in the fireplace near Boogoodoo. I gathered rocks from around the homestead to delineate the rim of the fire pit and left the vessels there overnight, again exposed to earth, wind, the stars and sun in preparation for the installation of my work the following day.

I was called over to the mustering kitchen to carve the large side of beef cooking in the great oven since I was deemed to be the best carver. The meat was burnt this time, which required lots of my strength to slice through the blackened top; nevertheless, it was delicious with the roast potatoes and carrots. I joined in cooking the dozens of muffins in preparation for the exhibition tomorrow—bulk bags of flour, sugar, essence and coloured icing galore. The owner of the station mixed the ingredients in a great pot and I spooned the mixture into the muffin tins. The mixture not quite coming off the spoon and needing a little help with fingers reminded me of the many times I had helped my mother cook endless cakes, standing on a chair, and of the cake aromas and salivation associated with licking the spoon and bowl. The owner set out many historical papers relating to Wongawol on the long dining table—newspaper clippings, photo albums and Xeroxed articles, which I interspersed with more photographs I had scanned from an earlier album and some of my small ceramic vessels, which had only been bisque fired. What a display. It resembled an historical pop-up museum: the years of Wongawol since just before the 1950s documented and now laying before us.

Early next morning, I set up my art pieces in Boogoodoo. Having practised each day, I knew exactly where all the pieces were to go. White ceramic vessels I placed in the kitchen at the base of the etchings to signify crucibles of knowledge, without really knowing why except that my being had forged the hollowed pieces of porcelain clay to perhaps recreate the shape of a history that had been erased. Like Bachelard's (1964)

poetic image that came from a place of unknowing, but which he describes as transcending knowledge, I wondered if I was tapping into a realm beyond consciousness when I began to fashion shapes with my hands that contained the spaces signifying daily life.

Neighbouring station owners arrived, and I became caught up with the history, nostalgia and abundant stories from times gone by. Stories of my great grandfather and Aboriginal people who worked on Wongawol, the myths and the stories about shootings, desert tribal reprisals and daily life. I forgot about my etchings hanging on the walls of Boogoodoo as the stories multiplied on top of the other and the historical album of photographs inspired story after story after story. The north wind whipped up, and I finally remembered my etchings hanging in Boogoodoo and went over to find them thrashing against the corrugated tin walls twisting about on the looped wire. Some of the pieces had torn from the corners where they were fixed to a bull clip that was looped onto the round yard wire. The energy was palpable, as if the desert spirits had arrived from the distant north-east to join in the celebration of lives lived at Wongawol, of a disappeared history and acknowledgement of souls and memory. My loose-leaf artist books were pinned by the wind, page by page, against the stone walls of the homestead, beckoned to now be part of the fine inscriptions and graffiti embodied in the structure of Boogoodoo and this place.

PART THREE

A Synthesis of Experiences, Ideas and Findings

SWEET GRACE COMING

*I've walked ancient lands where five rivers flow
I've seen black bodies, hanging from sheoak trees
I've walked giant mountains that are three feet high
I've seen sacred green water that destroys and delivers
I've seen the owl gather stars, moon and the giant white tree
And the black smiles that disappear in the dark
When it comes, the grace of it will be sweet and severe*

*I've seen flat lands bleeding with salt and steel
I've walked oceans of gold that rise from black blood
I've seen ghosts of nothing, empty, gone to another place
And stood upon solid waves where the waters flow
I've walked the toxic lands where it is screaming
I've seen machines gather and live in houses
When it comes, the grace of it will be sweet and severe*

*I've seen red dust blankets and riverbed homes
I've seen wide open faces and evil devouring them
I've seen white sugar law and the depths of depravity
I've seen evil draw up as lumps in the forehead
I've seen it working in the pale deformed faces
I walk with it and see its stupid grin with no eyes
When it comes, the grace of it will be sweet and severe*

(Cim Sears, 2020)

CONCLUSION

I am the absolute source. My existence does not come from my antecedents, nor from my physical and social surroundings; it moves out toward them and sustains them. For I am the one who brings into being for myself—and thus into being in the only sense that the word could have for me—this tradition that I choose to take up or this horizon whose distance from me would collapse were I not there to sustain it with my gaze (since this distance does not belong to the horizon as one of its properties). (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. lxxii)

Artist Albrecht Durer (as cited in van Alphen, 2017) believed that the artist possessed a “quasi-magical power” (p. 112), which was manifested most potently through the act of drawing. He believed that the hand was not directed by an idea but rather “perception in time” (p. 113), and he allowed all his mark making (lines), erasing none, to possess energy and prominence. Twombly surrendered himself to the hand holding the pencil, allowing himself to become the “medium through” (van Alphen, 2017, p. 116) which the lines manifested themselves. This kind of thinking gave me confidence in knowing that I could, through my art and mark making, find and resurrect the stunning and multitudinous stories of my desert ancestors and, therefore, more broadly, the Indigenous people of the Western Desert. My strong will to make a line, either by drawing or walking, allowing line to guide me through existential forms of map making, story-telling and making trace, is the overarching element in everything I have explored in my research. Line, as metaphor, for me reveals the past, present and future simultaneously, beyond socially constructed concepts of linear time and our physicality of separateness in the world.

Walking and all its manifestations, both real and abstract, can be described as fundamental to our existence, and to our interrelationship and connectivity to our environment and beyond. The metaphysical and phenomenological ideas of writers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard provided an essential avenue for my exploration into the potentiality and realisation of the existential nature of walking. I studied walking as used by poets, painters, filmmakers and writers to signpost the illusory and fragmentary pieces of our perceptions. The “habitual function” (de Certeau, 2008, p. 160) of walking is challenged and socially constructed “codified

perceptions” (p. 160) disrupted, and through this disruption, new narratives and new meanings come into being in a cycle that is continually unfolding. Acute attention to walking allowed for a deeper understanding of socially contextualised phenomena and their temporal and spatial positioning. Such phenomena, which awoke me to the realisation that walking, from an Australian Indigenous perspective, is poorly written about, present an interesting subject to explore in the future.

Beyond the binary of ideas, Chinna’s poetry illustrates the uncanny similarity and universality between the vanishing wetlands of Perth, and their appropriation, and the lives of my ancestors in the Western Desert. Ideas of cyclical absence, loss and grief, characteristic of the human relationship to the earth, invoke Derrida’s (1976) notion of absence/presence as the two concepts contain elements of the other in a long unending woven chain. The notion of Being as always “already there” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii) presupposes a knowing before conscious existence and the creation of language. Absence is implicit in all things—presence is woven by the trace or threads of meanings that lie in the gaps between words. Derrida’s (1973) deconstruction of dichotomies is essentially a semiotic theory of un-doing, a metaphysical analysis in the attempt to understand life beyond the quest for the tangible and glimpses of the End. My ceramics grew from a desire to find something, and in that instance, became vessels of knowledge in their alchemy.

Absence, on many levels, is invoked by Anselm Kiefer’s art practice, which highlights the tragic reality of a people and their culture obliterated by the senseless, violent depravity of others. His visceral representations, through art, of the holocaust are an appropriate way of encountering the historical genocide of the Australian Aboriginal people (Lawson, 2015) and, more specifically, my area of research. Kiefer was born when the Third Reich fell and, as a boy, was confronted with the aftermath of apocalyptic human destruction of unspeakable proportions. Through his artworks he confronts the viewer with what remains; he will not allow the ashes of human bodies to be forgotten, and he uses the ash and other richly evocative materials to project the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. His paintings are extremely large, overpowering in their tactility, and Kiefer is deeply entangled within his haptic, unapologetic reflection of history. One cannot look away; memory is embedded in his

work, as are the events of human suffering that he is acknowledging through an embodied art practice. Kiefer's work is about truth telling; it is serious and laden with "esoteric symbolism and political meaning" (Needham, 2011, p. 1). For societies who are unwilling to confront their own history, Kiefer's example is a potent way for an artist to harness power to effect change on a social, cultural and political level.

The findings of my research have uncovered family history and some of the traditional practices of my ancestor's daily lives. Using the processes of reflexivity and acute immersion in the desert environment, I was able to experience the physicality of place and gain knowledge of an ancient culture and of the country. Significantly, in this very remote part of WA, Wongawol, where a history and a people's lives have been severely disrupted and torn, my research symbolises a salvaging, a reclaiming of human dignity and place after a very long time in the wilderness of grief, trauma, neglect and loss. In the final analysis of the scope of my practice-led research, it was through utilising the methodology of walking supported by concepts of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and Derrida's ideas of absence/presence (Bell, 2014) that enabled my journeying deep into the temporal and metaphysical connections of my ancestors and their country. This has shed light on the significance and qualities of walking as knowing and making, signified by the depth and breadth of my creative art pieces. Intrinsic to my own relationship, as subject, to the process—both in terms of the physicality of creating artworks and of the existential and phenomenological realm of pursuing a trace—I was able to find and begin to follow the historically erased lives of my ancestors within the Western Desert landscape, lives that are largely absent from the history books. Importantly, this has implications for a wider, deeper exploration of the Indigenous people of the Western Desert.

ENDNOTES

PART ONE: Methodology and Techniques of Embodiment

BACKGROUND

[1] *Native Administration Act 1936* (WA)—An Act implemented in response to the Moseley Royal Commission, which established the Department of Native Affairs and the permit system. It also established a court for ‘tribal Aborigines’.

INTRODUCTION

[2] Rhythmanalysis is essentially a method of analysing the rhythms of lived spaces and the effects of the rhythms on the inhabitants. It investigates how movement is a primary way of “engaging with the world” (Chen, 2013, p. 531).

WALKING, EMBODIMENT, SPACE AND TIME

[3] Eido-kinetic intuition is described as the “inherent sense mobile subjects have of their relationship with their surroundings” (Carter, 2009, as cited in Chen, 213, p. 534).

[4] *Mappa mundi*—An ancient phenomenal map of the world, not only cartographic.

IDEAS OF ABSENCE/PRESENCE

[5] Bricolage—Something made from a variety of available things.

[6] Logos—The Word of God or principle of divine reason and creative order.

IMMERSIVE TECHNIQUES

[7] Structural film—Deliberately abolishes narratives and is more concerned with the representational functions of the filmic medium and the relationship with the viewer (Chen, 2013).

A NOTE ON ARCHIVES

[8] Restricted personal archival files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories), WA.

THE POWER OF LINE—CY TWOMBLY

[9] The image on the wall of the Boogoodoo homestead had been scratched by a drover—one of many who, over the years, had been employed by the station during the cattle muster.

THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE—WARWICK THORNTON

[10] Indentured labour via the government permit system whereby all Aboriginal people were controlled by the federal and state governments and employers were required to pay for a permit per Aboriginal person, which was paid directly to the government. Aboriginal workers were not paid by their bosses except in kind. (Government archives, personal communications, WA).

[11] Terra nullius—Land that is legally (in this case by the occupier) considered unoccupied and uninhabited.

[12] Restricted personal archival files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories).

[13] List of WA Legislation (2020). Kaartdijin Noongar. South West Aboriginal Land Council. <https://www.noogarculture.org.au/list-of-wa-legislation/>

[14] Restricted personal archival files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories).

[15] *ibid.*

[16] *ibid.*

[17] *ibid.*

[18] *ibid.*

[19] Anecdotal story told by my father when he was a stockman, 1942–1947, on Paradise Station, east of Derby on the Fitzroy River, WA.

INITIAL THOUGHTS ON METHODS AND MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT

[20] *Mappae mundi*—Ancient phenomenal maps of the world, not only cartographic.

[21] A songline or dreaming track is a path across the land that represents the Aboriginal belief system, signifying creator-beings within a larger belief system referred to as ‘Dreaming’.

PART TWO: Three Embodied Journeys to Wongawol

ONE—SEPTEMBER ’17

[1] The Princess Ranges are located approximately 215 kilometres east of Wiluna, WA.

[2] Restricted personal archival files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories).

[3] The Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia at the time was A. O. Neville.

[4] A reference made in the personal files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories), (2005).

[5] As a result of government policy, fairer skinned children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in ‘Native Settlements’ and orphanages. Stolen Generations—*Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

[6] Dongas—transportable steel shipping containers that have been modified to suit living quarters, originally used for mining sites.

[7] Comprehensive topographical maps called Natmap, produced by Geoscience Australia (2003), Australian Government.

[8] Cobb & Co was a successful horse-drawn coach company that provided transportation in all states of Australia.

[9] 'Miniritchie' or *Acacia cyperophylla* is a creek-line tree that has thin, red, curly bark that splits and curls back lengthways and horizontally to expose new green bark.

[10] An entry made in the personal files—Department of Indigenous Affairs. Outcamps were typically a long way from the homestead where workers would make camp and attend to the cattle and wells before the advent of vehicles.

[11] Warburton is a town and Aboriginal mission reserve near the WA and Northern Territory border.

[12] File retrieved from the State Records Office of Western Australia.

TWO—JUNE '18

[1] Typically, members of the Stolen Generations live in a cloud of silence, a phenomenon seen in holocaust victims because of their life trauma.

[2] Restricted personal archival files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories).

[3] *ibid.*

[4] *ibid.*

[5] Gunbarrel Highway was named because it followed the path or trajectory of the British missiles testing in the 1960s. Len Beadell, who constructed it, wanted to build it as straight as a 'gun barrel' and for fun named it a highway. www.https://abc.net.au

[6] A mill run is a daily work job to travel all over the station country and check the windmills and digitised water tanks are in good working order.

[7] Bronco yards—A specialised wooden structure that allowed one animal (usually a horse) to harness and bring under control another animal (bullock) by a series of ropes being threaded through the wooden structure and controlled by a person at the end of the rope.

THREE—SEPTEMBER '19

[1] Restricted personal archival files—Department of Indigenous Affairs, Government of Western Australia (Family Histories).

[2] *ibid.*

[3] *ibid.*

[4] “Native title is the recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have rights and interests to land and waters according to their traditional law and customs as set out in Australian Law. Native Title is governed by the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)” (Kimberly Land Council, 2020).

[5] “Reconsideration of Claim”— Applicants seek reconsideration of the claim pursuant to s 190E of the *Native Title Act*. www.nntt.gov.au

[6] Research conducted at the WA State Library sourcing newspaper articles and government documents.

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