A WALK AROUND NGAYIRR NGURAMBANG (SACRED COUNTRY):

Art making in response to being with The Drip, Wiradjuri Country, Australia

[Received March 24th 2026 accepted April 2nd 2026 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.293]

Jessica McLean

Macquarie University, Sydney <jessica.mclean@mq.edu.au>

Aleshia Lonsdale

<www.aleshialonsdale.com>

ABSTRACT: Even as coal mining expands across regional Australia, harming most aspects of Country, moments of possibility continue to emerge through reflecting on, and being with, water places. This reflection recounts a walk along the Goulburn River, a waterway now partly shaped by extractive practices, to The Drip, an important water place. The walk formed part of the process of developing an exhibition on Ngayirr Ngurambang (sacred Country), curated by co-author Aleshia Lonsdale, a local Wiradjuri woman, and featuring artworks by Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. By sharing this account, we aim to foreground relational connections grounded in Ngayirr Ngurambang. We argue that centring Indigenous understandings of water places, and deepening non-Indigenous understandings of what Country means, can help open up alternative futures. We also suggest that walking with Country and engaging with artworks that convey what Country means—by First Nations and non-First Nations artists—offers practical ways to decentre settler-colonial power, practices, and knowledges.

KEYWORDS: Country; Wiradjuri; art; water places; walking

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Around Mudgee[1], before the end of the last La Niña[2], the rain was often relentless, but this part of Wiradjuri Country has been weathering such climatic fluctuations for many years. The land became absurdly green from that particular rainy time, rivers and creeks flowing with abundance, alternating between flows of turbid brown and silky khaki water, depending on how much time had elapsed since the last downpour, and waterholes reappeared outside the main streams.

[1] Located in the Central West region of New South Wales, about 260 kilometres north west of Sydney.

[2] La Niña is a term used to describe a weather system that occurs when equatorial winds are stronger than usual, pulling cooler water to the surface and resulting in higher than average rainfalls in Australia (Bureau of Meteorology, 2016).

Here, we weave together a walk in one small and beautiful part of Wiradjuri Country called The Drip, about 35 minutes drive from Mudgee, in eastern Australia (see Figures 1 & 2), with reflections on an exhibition inspired by that important water place, called 'Ngayirr Ngurambang: Sacred Country', at the Mudgee Arts Precinct (2022). It is a water place that is special to both of us, having grown up in the area and sharing long associations with it: Aleshia Lonsdale is a Wiradjuri artist and curator, and Jessica McLean is a white settler colonial geographer. We both (the authors of this piece) took the walk that grounds this reflection months before the exhibition opened last year, joining Irene Ridgeway, Wiradjuri artist and contributor to the exhibition, on her first walk along the Goulburn River to The Drip. Walking with Country can nurture cross-cultural understanding, by allowing connections to build across vulnerabilities and reason (Rey and Harrison, 2018; Somerville, 2022). We invite you to join us, by reading this or visiting The Drip in person at another time, if you are able to get there, and begin to experience this water place in your own way.

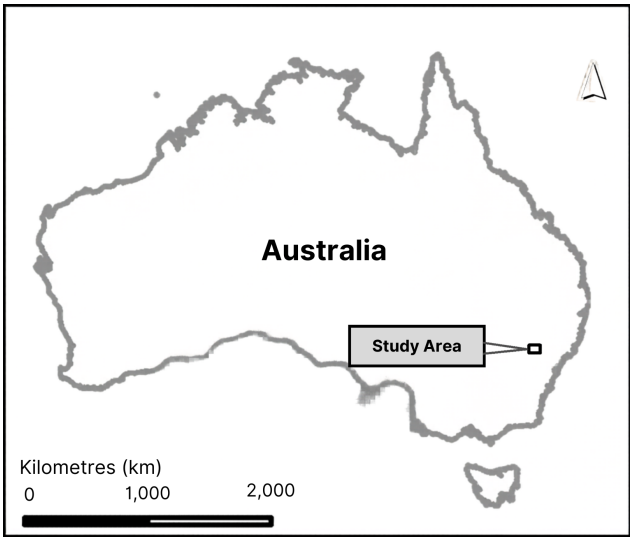

Figure 1 - Map showing the location of Wiradjuri Country in eastern Australia.

Wiradjuri Country encompasses about 80,000 square kilometres (MacDonald, 1998) and is now dominated, visually, by farming activity and coal mining. Wiradjuri people faced colonial invasion and the imposition of settler colonial structures from the early 1800s. Those that survived this violence maintain connections to Country; the Wiradjuri language is currently undergoing a revival and education institutions are offering opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to learn it. We use the term 'Country' to refer to the lands, waterways and seas, and all they contain, to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are connected. Country 'contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity.' (AIATSIS, 2021).

The part of Country that we're spending time with today is shared by Wiradjuri, Kamilaroi/Gamileroi and Wonnarua peoples. The Drip is part of the eastward flowing Goulburn River, a tributary to the Hunter River, and has not been regulated by dam construction but did have its headwaters blown up and rechannelled to allow for coal mining to begin (McLean et al, 2018).

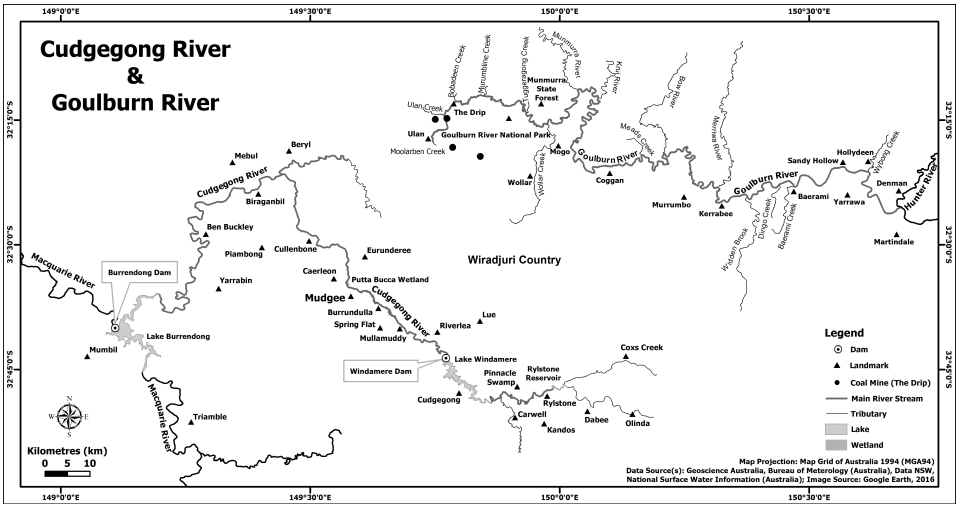

Figure 2 - Map of Wiradjuri Country showing the major rivers around Mudgee.

Focusing on The Drip, 'Ngayirr Ngurambang: Sacred Country' opened at the new Mudgee Arts Precinct on Friday 23 September, the first time a formal art exhibition was curated by an Aboriginal person in this town (McLean et al, 2025). The exhibition was curated by one of the authors of this piece – Aleshia Lonsdale, a Wiradjuri woman and artist – and it celebrated the importance of Country and story through creative artworks. It shared cultural, environmental, historical and social values that make up the water cultures of The Drip, on the Goulburn River, and other water places in Wiradjuri Country. Water places are variable and ever changing (Gibbs, 2009), affected by multiple factors at different scales, and are fluid, in a literal and metaphorical sense (Strang, 2004). Artists were invited to spend time at The Drip if they had not yet been there to ground their responses to this special place. During the exhibition's opening, over several months in late 2022, over eight thousand people experienced The Drip from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples' points of view as captured in their art.

For our walk, we met on the pathway to The Drip on an overcast winter's morning. The Drip is an important women's sacred site for Wiradjuri people, and is now part of a national park, even while coalmining intensifies around it. Belying its awkward naming, The Drip is a spectacular sandstone spring-fed cliff that forms part of a gorge on the Goulburn River, an upper tributary of the Hunter River that meets the sea in Newcastle. As its name suggests, water often drips from the escarpment into the Goulburn below, nourishing ferns, algae and lichen on the way, creating a colourful mat of life on an ever-changing sandstone wall, as shown in Figure 3. The Drip was only gazetted within a National Park in 2015 and is cared for under a co-management agreement between Mudgee Local Aboriginal Land Council and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. Somewhat controversially, Brett Whiteley painted a mural on a rock-face here in the 1970s during a heady camping trip on the Goulburn.

Our walk was a few months before Ngayirr Ngurambang was scheduled to open and Irene was taking in this welcoming place for the first time. We walked together, seeing it through new eyes, taking photos and remarking on its features as we slowly worked our way along the river. Irene noticed shapes that reminded her of women's anatomy in the shadows

between rocks, admired the layers and lines in rock faces, observed the richness of colour on sandstone walls including blacks, yellows, oranges, pinks and purples. We talked about the forms of rock hugging the river – conglomerate interspersed with sandstone layers – as evidence of floods from times before now fixed in rockfaces.

Figure 3 - The Drip, Goulburn River (McLean, 2022)

Ngayirr Ngurambang brought together First Nations artists' and non-First Nations artists' views of, and responses to, this treasured water place. Ngayirr Ngurambang helped people connect with The Drip by sharing visual, audio and textual works that are evocative and powerful. It also invited people to reflect on water cultures and the making of "shadow waters". We co-wrote an article on shadow waters a few years ago to critique how particular water values, often First Nations' people's, are 'hidden' in favour of others (McLean et al, 2018). Shadow waters are metaphorical, in the sense that particular water values are 'hidden' or 'demoted' in favour of others, and literal, for instance ground water is usually not as visible as surface water. Water cultures refer to how people relate to and value water, shaped by their identity, experiences and preferences.

Fiona MacDonald's contribution to Ngayirr Ngurambang, 'Surface Tensions – Shadow Waters', is a collection of 5 watercolours that are interpretations of historic photographs taken at The Drip. The earlier pieces are renderings of picnics held by people at this water place, figures stand statically looking at the camera in long dresses and full suits, while the last painting captures a protest against mining expansion in the area, with people holding signs proclaiming "NO MORE COAL MINES NEAR MUDGEE!" above what looks like a newspaper headline of 'David vs Goliath'. Fiona, a white artist, describes her art in the following way: "my paintings… show how a brutal colonial 'shadowy history' of *terra nullius* and dispossession has resurfaced and is inverted by co-operative campaigns created by local environmentalists and First Nations people to protect the area from the impacts of coal mining" (Macdonald, 2022). These watercolours critique the continued settler colonial overwriting of The Drip and show moments of rupture, too, shining a light upon unsustainable and damaging extractivist practices (Figure 4 shows one of the pieces).

The water politics of The Drip are shaped by human and non-human agents and embedded in histories and presences of Aboriginal care for Country while non-Indigenous peoples and institutions dominate. For example, Aboriginal custodianship of Country of The Drip persists despite the ways that these relations are often marginalised within settler colonial processes. As such, water in this place, as in so many others, is consistently "implicated in contested relationships of power and authority" (Bakker, 2012: 616). The contestations are evident in these mediated images where different water histories are placed alongside each other.

Figure 4 - Fiona MacDonald's 'Surface Tensions – Shadow Waters.'

Wiradjuri water knowledges are often cast as marginal and/or historic in planning processes, putting these ways of knowing in a time/space shadow. The myth of *aqua nullius*, water belonging to no one, has been strongly critiqued (Moggridge, 2023; Marshall, 2016) but it still seeps in to how water places are perceived and managed by some government agencies and corporate interests. Pre-colonial times and spaces are the locus of Wiradjuri water knowledges according to aqua nullius thinking, irrespective of ongoing Indigenous presences and work to care for Country in the current day.

As we got closer to The Drip, we talked about how the water might feel like it was cradled by the sandstone gorge on both riverbanks. Irene shared that the river was a calm, welcoming spot, held in place by the sandstone cliffs. A sense of protection abides in The Drip and this affect can be read in Maddison Gibbs Wing's mural 'Female Protector Spirit' (Figure 5). Maddison, a Barkindji artist, made a stencil at The Drip from seeds, nuts, and weeds washed up from recent floods, and portrays her art as inspired by 'Aboriginal female ancestors who are still continuing the fight'.

Figure 5 - Maddison Gibbs Wing's 'Female Protector Spirit' (Laura Hammersley, 2022)

While walking along the river, we talked about Irene's plans for her own contribution to Ngayirr Ngurambang. Irene teaches Jess about fumage – painting with smoke – and it sounds like a wonderful way to capture the layers of The Drip. Using smoke from a fire lit to warm on a wintry day and to make billy tea,[3] Irene did end up using fumage to create shadows of light and dark on the canvas. Her final piece brings together photos of The Drip with her responses to the landscape in textures that are at once warm and nostalgic, layering images of parts of trees with traces of whirling smoke, echoing the layered nature of the sandstone escarpment. Carbon particles are the thread joining Irene's five canvases, bringing together smoke, people and culture to symbolically talk of loss, and finding space to grow. Irene Ridgeway's 'Smoke' (Figure 6) richly engages with the multiple and intertwined environmental crises that come to bear on The Drip.

Figure 6 - Irene 'Ridgeway's Smoke' – one piece of five canvases that make up the artwork (Laura Hammersley, 2022).

We paused at the Brett Whiteley paintings on the other side of the river from our path. Aleshia observed how people assume it was a women's birthing site because of the imagery appropriated by Whiteley despite the local Aboriginal community asserting this was not the case. We choose not to include images of Whiteley's artwork as it was painted without

[3] a hot drink made by boiling water in a metal ('billy') tin on an open fire which is often infused with eucalyptus leaf smoke, providing a distinct flavour.

permission and appropriates Aboriginal art practices (McLean et al, 2025). There is much more to women's business than birthing sites and most of the time it was full of murky water, so why would you want to give birth there? Jason Wing's 'National Treasure' (Figure 7) confronts Whiteley's artwork, re-appropriating it and provoking us to consider whether it should remain in place on the sandstone cliff upstream The Drip. 'National Treasure' shows a bound feminine figure in acrylic spray paint on the gallery wall. Jason's piece sits in parallel to Maddison's mural, forming one whole side of the gallery, monochrome starkness on his side and a constellation of rich charcoal on Maddison's.

Figure 7 - Jason Wing's 'National Treasure' (Laura Hammersley, 2022).

The overwhelming force of water of recent floods was evident as we walked along the riverside. The huge sandstone blocks that were in place as a bridge on Bobadeen Creek, a tributary of the Goulburn, seemed immovable as we hopped across them, but Aleshia shared that several of the blocks had been forced downstream in recent rains. After the rain passed that particular time, the National Parks and Wildlife Service had collected them and brought them back to re-form the bridge across Bobadeen.

The ways that water makes its presence felt varies with its volume and velocity. The water marks the landscape by staining rock and riparian banks, uplifting plants of different sizes,

moving sediment, rocks and riverweed. While water can make its way around solid objects, it can and does shift them, too. You can see how water has sculpted the gorge at The Drip when you arrive there, but you can also hear it, as water drops fall into the Goulburn (if the river is flowing sufficiently), and the river rushes over sandstone rocks as it flows downstream. Kim V. Goldsmith's 'The Drip' is a multi-track sound mix overlaying a video of water moving and captures the sensory depth of this water place. As you watch the water swirl on screen, through headphones you listen to immersive sounds that take you out of the gallery and to the river. Goldsmith, a white artist, produced the audio of her artwork from field recordings at The Drip, layering birdsong with water falling, human footsteps crunching gravel and including 'reverberations shaped by the sandstone gorge'. The rock walls, water, and how it lands all have agency here; the audio recording illuminates relations between humans and more-than-humans in a way that focuses on flow and fluidity rather than bounded categories (Gallagher et al, 2017). You can be at The Drip while being in Mudgee and time/space warps again.

Back to our river walk where animals have shared our walkway but not, at least this time, while we traversed it. We noted scats on the path as an indication of an early morning walk by a wombat. Aleshia pointed out a lyre bird nest perched two metres above the track in an overhanging sandstone ledge. She said how hard it would have to work to get up there – jumping once, twice, then again up to the ledge.

The shadow waters idea was inspired by Val Plumwood's 'shadow places' concept. Val Plumwood (2008) asks for a politics of place that is both social and ecological and invites us to value not only those places we identify as special and aesthetically beautiful but also shadow places. Shadow places are sites "that we don't have to know about but whose degradation we as commodity consumers are indirectly responsible for" (Plumwood, 2008 no page numbers). For Plumwood, the shadow places idea helped her to think about uneven distribution of costs and benefits of capitalism on a global scale.

We applied the shadow places concept to watery places, and in particular, the Goulburn and the Cudgegong, because of the strong connections between them, despite their hydrological differences (McLean et al, 2018). Our conversations along these two rivers included comparisons between them: the Cudgegong flows through the Mudgee township, while the Goulburn is a drive out of town, the former has a clear visibility and garden-like value to townfolk, while the latter is subject to transformations from coal mining and a place of significant natural beauty. So shadow waters takes the idea of shadow places and applies it to geographies of water to explain how some water bodies are privileged while others are marginalised in resource decision-making.

One of the central pieces in Ngayirr Ngurambang is a possum skin cloak, prepared collaboratively by the Mudgee Local Aboriginal Land Council, that shows the path of the Goulburn and special sites along it. The cloak will grow and change over time, as generations come along and add to it, building their own stories into those already woven into the skin. The stunning possum skin cloak is mapping water places, a form of sharing knowledge about personal and community connections to territory, that McGraw (2012) notes is also being revived in other parts of south-eastern Australia including Victoria. The mapping practices that are woven into the possum skin (Figure 8) offers a way of communicating local Aboriginal people's ways of thinking and being.

Figure 8 - Mudgee Local Aboriginal Land Council's possum skin cloak (McLean, 2022)

Mudgee has a settler colonial history of over two centuries and this is an important art exhibition that presents First Nations artists' and non-First Nations artists' views of Country in compelling ways. Ngayirr Ngurambang: Sacred Country asks us to think about The Drip as a part of Wiradjuri Country that gives care and invites attention, while also recognising how it cares for and attends to humans and non-humans alike.

Heavy rainfall has led to rivers and creeks bursting their banks in regional Australia during the last La Niña, resulting in loss of life, property and transformed environments in a rapid turn-around from years of intense drought and serious bushfires. Those devastating floods should prompt us to think about how and why water has been managed in this nation since colonisation, as well as how we might think differently about our shared water futures. The boom-and-bust cycles that characterise much of this land and its waters have been exacerbated by climate change. Centring how Indigenous people view water places and developing deeper understandings of what Country means are two ways in which we might usher in these alternative futures. Walking with Country and attending to works that aim to reflect and share what Country means, by First Nations and non-First Nations artists, are practical and meaningful ways to decentre settler colonial power and knowledges.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the artists who contributed to the exhibition Ngayirr Ngurambang. An extra big thank you to Maddison Gibbs Wing, Irene Ridgeway, Fiona MacDonald, Jason Wing and the Mudgee Local Aboriginal Land Council for permission to share your works here. Many thanks to Shahriar Rahman for creating the updated map. And thanks to the editor and peer reviewers for guidance and feedback that has helped us develop this piece.

REFERENCES

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2021). *Welcome to Country,* https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/welcome-country

Bakker, K. (2012). Water: Political, biopolitical, material. *Social Studies of Science*, *42,* 616–623.

Bureau of Meteorology. (2016). What is La Niña and how does it impact Australia? http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/updates/articles/a020.shtml#:~:text=La%20Ni%C3%B1a%20occurs%20when%20equatorial,and%20eastern%20tropical%20Pacific%20Ocean.

Gallagher, M., Kanngieser, A. & Prior, J. (2017). Listening geographies: Landscape, affect and geotechnologies. *Progress in Human Geography*, *41*(5), 618-637.

Gibbs, L. (2009). Water places: Cultural, social and more-than-human geographies of nature. *Scottish Geographical Journal*, *125*, 361–369.

Hannam, P. (2015, March 14). New South Wales election: The Drip Gorge carved out of coal lease to Yancoal. *Sydney Morning Herald*. https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/nsw-state-election-2015-the-drip-gorge-carved-out-of-coal-lease-to-yancoal-20150313-1438rv.html

Imrie, J. (2019). Changing land use in an uncertain climate: impacts on surface water and groundwater in the Goulburn River NSW. PhD Thesis, Australian National University. https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/172041

MacDonald, F. (2022). Surface-tensions - Shadow Waters, Ngayirr Ngurambang: Sacred Country exhibition, Mudgee Arts Precinct, Mudgee, NSW, Australia.

Marshall, V. (2016). Deconstructing Aqua Nullius: Reclaiming Aboriginal water rights and communal identity in Australia. *Indigenous Law Bulletin*, *8*(26), 9.

McDonald, G. (1998). Master narratives and the dispossession of the Wiradjuri. *Aboriginal History*, *22*, 162-179.

McGaw, J. (2014). Mapping 'place' in Southeast Australia: Crafting a possum skin cloak. *Craft Research*, *5*(1), 11-33.

McLean, J., Hammersley, L. & Sullivan, C. T. (2025). Connections to Ngayirr Ngurambang (Sacred Country) and art undermining settler colonial power. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02637758251389381

McLean, J., Lonsdale, A., Hammersley, L. et al. (2018). Shadow waters: making Australian water cultures visible. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *43*(4), 615-629.

Moggridge, B. (2021) Indigenous water knowledge and values in an Australasian context, *Australasian Journal of Water Resources*, *25*:1, 1-3,

Moggridge, B.J. (2023) Incorporating the cultural values and perspectives of Australia's First Peoples (Aboriginal People) into water planning and environmental water management. PhD thesis, University of Canberra.

https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/studentTheses/incorporating-the-cultural-values-and-perspectives-of-australias-/

Mudgee Arts Precinct, 2022. Ngayirr Ngurambang: Sacred Country, https://www.mudgeeartsprecinct.com.au/WHATS-ON/Exhibition-Archive/Ngayirr-Ngurambang-Sacred-Country#:~:text=Ngayirr%20Ngurambang%3A%20Sacred%20Country%20celebrated,River%20and%20The%20Drip%20Gorge

Plumwood, V. (2008). Shadow places and the politics of dwelling. *Australian Humanities Review*, 44, 139–150.

Rey, J. & Harrison, N. (2018). Sydney as an Indigenous place: "Goanna walking" brings people together. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, *14*(1), 81-89.

Somerville, M. J. (2022). Country calls: A creative practice of deep time walking in Darug country. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 28(5), 448-464.

Strang, V. (2004) *The meaning of water,* Routledge.