I am a curator at the National Museum of Australia, a social history museum that opened in 2001. I work in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program. One of my tasks in 2007 was to re-vamp an older exhibit on one of the key threads in Indigenous history, the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities. The exhibit includes the story of Link-Up, the organisation that reunites Aboriginal families dismembered by the policies of child removal. In this chapter, I track this task from a curatorial perspective, outlining some of the questions I have faced over the past three years.¹

I locate myself on one side of the historical fracture that I see running through any episode of Australian history – that of the colonisation of Aboriginal Australia. I am on the colonising side of that fracture and my clients, whose story I am telling, are on the other. So I always understand my task as telling someone else’s story. I did not have this ‘location’ when I was working in the environmental history section of the Museum.

What is an ‘Aboriginal object’?

As a museum curator, my working premise is that objects ‘hold’ history. Objects that have been part of a human experience or event are able to communicate something of that experience to us; by preserving and displaying these objects, we make a connection with this event or experience.

The focus of the first version of the Stolen Generations exhibit had been a moving and powerful artwork centred on the original gates from the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children’s Home. This item was due to be returned. I needed new objects for the exhibit.

¹ Readers should think of this article as a primary source, rather than as a compendium of contemporary theory of museology.
The Museum, however, had very few relevant objects that I could use. The majority of its Indigenous collection consists firstly of traditional artefacts and secondly of artworks, particularly bark paintings, of which it has the most extensive collection in the world. My other area of interest as a curator is the post-contact history of Aboriginal people’s lives in missions, reserves, settlements, and camps. Again, the Museum has some artworks that tell this story – such as works by Elaine Russell and Lin Onus – and some material belonging to former missionaries, but very little else. The Museum has very little of the material culture that arises from the ways the majority of Aboriginal people in Australia spent the greater part of the twentieth century.

My search for new objects, both for the Stolen Generations exhibit and for other exhibits, led me to question how we traditionally define what constitutes an Aboriginal object. I visited a central Queensland Aboriginal township with fellow curator and Munnuntjarli-Gungarri woman, Barbara Paulson. When we talk to the local community about collecting objects that would tell the story of their community within the Museum, people immediately began to bring out painted boomerangs, clapsticks, and children’s art in the style of Arnhem Land rock art. They apologise for having so little to show. Yet lying in the grass in the local sportsground were two giant stew pots, probably left over from the coastal whaling industry. Once they had been used to feed the whole community. These stewpots told the story of that period of incarceration – both the negative aspects of repression, police-state policies – and the positive of community bonds that existed despite the repression, and partly because of it. Yet the community was not interested in giving one of these stewpots to the Museum – for them it was both their object and not an Aboriginal object.

The notion of an Aboriginal object is also challenged and expanded by one of the other objects in the Museum’s collection – two sets of seats from the old Ray-Mond Theatre, Bowraville, northern New South Wales that have recently come into the Museum’s collection. One set of five is wooden; the other set of three faded red plush. The Ray-Mond theatre, like many other country cinemas, was segregated until it closed in 1965. The wooden seats were for the Aboriginal patrons; the plush seats for everybody else. Aboriginal patrons entered through a special door after the film had begun. This theatre was one of those targeted by the Freedom Ride in 1965. These seats by their physical structure and their implicit relationship, side by side, tell the story of segregation in Australia at that time.

As a curator, and looking at what is in its collection, I wonder if the Museum had unknowingly taken on the construction held by the wider community, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that only certain kinds of objects are ‘Aboriginal objects’. Objects that are not visually immediately identifiable as ‘Indigenous’ have not been as extensively collected as those that are.
Barbara Paulson and I talk about the Aboriginal attitude to mundane (as opposed to sacred) objects. Barbara sees how Aboriginal communities often perceive everyday objects differently. An object such as a spear or a football jersey is usually not valuable *in itself*. An object is part of a complex web of human relationships and it is only its continued existence within that web of relationships that gives it any meaning. Who is using it now? Who gave it to that person? Who might that person pass it on to? Who knows how to make it? So far so good, but at this point the cultures diverge. Take a ‘community’ away from the object’s *continuing* interaction with people and the object becomes meaningless. Meaning does not attach to an object; meaning is shone upon it in a series of projections by its temporal situation within those relationships. As a curator, I take away that meaning by removing it from that continuing relation.

Christine Hansen, another curator at the Museum and doctoral student, found the same thing. For her thesis, she chose to work with a south-eastern Aboriginal community, to make a collection of objects so that their story could be told in a Museum exhibit. The response of the community was quite different from the one she expected. For that community, objects did not hold history.
Objects move in and out of their lives, but they do not accrete meaning through that process. Their history was held in their stories and photographs. However, Christine also found that the community really wanted to have their story told in the Museum and they, like the central Queensland community Barbara and I visited, were prepared to act on her cultural assumptions and to provide objects and artefacts for the Museum. They were prepared to tell their story in the ‘language’ of the Museum: that is, the language of objects as history.

If this is how Aboriginal people often see objects, how do they see the Museum?

Working with Indigenous communities presents a cultural complexity that challenges my assumptions and which I confront in my work. I ask Troy Pickwick, another Indigenous curator, about the Aboriginal response to museums and he replies:

Aboriginal people – they look at the Museum and they think ‘Oh that’s whitefella business’. Nothing to do with them.

I visit an Aboriginal elder who had recently donated one of the few items of mission cultural history we have in the Collection – a piece of ripple iron from the former Hollywood reserve near Yass – and saw him tossing an invitation to a Museum exhibition opening in the bin. He comments:

Yeah, we’ll come to the Museum one day – just waiting for something we want to see.

He appreciates the Museum’s role of keeping history and of telling it to the future. He is acutely aware that the history he has taken part in is little valued by his non-Indigenous local community. He also knows that his local Indigenous community is in general not interested in museum ways of preserving the past. His anxiety to preserve that past however has resulted in his donation to the Museum – but he still sees the Museum as in some sense still irrelevant.

I ask Barbara what Aboriginal people in general might think of museums. She replies:

Ask the average Aboriginal person in the street – ‘What do you think of museums?’ and they’ll say ‘That’s where they’ve got all those old bones – the ones they stole from the graves’.

Therefore, there is not only irrelevance to consider when I am working with Aboriginal clients but also violence, a cultural rape that locates the Museum in opposition to the Aboriginal community.
I take an Aboriginal visitor on a tour of the Museum. She is a relative of Troy’s. We pass an open doorway through which we can glimpse racks of spears and shields. The woman hastily averts her eyes. ‘Looks like men’s business in there’, she comments. She does not trust the Museum to keep her safe, to keep to cultural protocols – even though she has a relative on the staff. The room in fact is a display area showing traditional artefacts from both men and women.

These encounters make me more concerned to tie the object to the person who gave it, to try to ensure the meaning that it has for that person at the moment of donation remains attached to that person. This meaning may be different from the provenance that museums require. Rather, it is the meaning for that person at that moment in time. I have begun using video recordings of people with the object they have donated recording them, as they talk about it, touch it, explaining what it meant to them when they gave it.

The legacy of colonising violence means that I feel I am bound to an implied unwritten contract of trust with the Aboriginal people I work with. The ‘contract’ between us implies that if they tell me their stories I will then re-tell them in the Museum in the way that best represents their histories as they see them. I send all the text of the labels to them. If they do not like it, I change it and send it back again. I have told all the people I have mentioned that their stories will be included in this paper. I do this because I am the heir to all that bad faith between Aboriginal people and museums. It does not mean that I include anywhere material that I consider inaccurate or distorted history, or that I abandon my professional responsibilities, but I keep faith in attempting to represent their stories as they see them.

The Stolen Generations exhibit

This question of trust is particularly acute when working with Stolen Generations material. It is raw. In Australia, the story of the removal of Aboriginal children is ‘new’ history – still unfolding – still affecting the lives of living people. The Stolen Generations people who are willing for me to present their personal stories in the Museum know that some visitors will not believe them. These clients may not have read Andrew Bolt’s columns on the ‘myth’ of the Stolen Generations, but they still understand that their story is contested.² The 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations by the Australian government has given them more assurance than they had previously, but they still have a basic distrust of governments and the non-Indigenous community.

It is my task to attempt to tell the Stolen Generations story in the museum. This story is of course complex. There are different responses to the experience of

² For example, Bolt 2004.
removal – despair, anger, resolve to succeed despite all, a triumphant return to Aboriginality, a denial of Aboriginality. There are different kinds of loss – personal, communal, cultural. People were not only denied the experience of family life, of a relation with parents, siblings and extended family, but the transfer of cultural knowledge. There are the various institutions – church or government – who took and cared for removed children, the foster homes or adoptive families who took removed children. There is the role of the government policy and of Link-Up to be explored.

I had first to collect some new objects. The only significant appropriate item already in our Collection was an artwork, *Matters of Her Heart*, by Pamela Croft, which explores her personal story as a removed child. It is a powerful assemblage of documents that relate to her personal experience – adoption papers, marriage and divorce certificates, letters to her birth mother and adoptive mother, and photographs of herself and her families. These are contextualised with a large painting of a riven heart and face fractured into jigsaw pieces and a heart-shape decorated with ochre and human hair.

To this painting, I added a booklet, another painting by a former inmate of an Aboriginal orphanage, a boomerang, a hatband and bracelet in Aboriginal colours, an old Namatjira print, and two scrapbooks. I could at least begin to tell that complex story.

The booklet is by Peter Read, first published in 1981. It marks the first use of the term Stolen Generations and is a document which can speak to the government policies that underlay so many of the removals. The painting, *Matters of Her Heart*, is by Cecil Bowden, incarcerated from the age of ten in the notorious Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home. His painting shows three heads behind what appear to be prison bars and is titled ‘There only crime was: born Aboriginal’ [sic]. The boomerang was donated by Barbara Nicholson. She was removed from her community at aged four and returned to it as an adult. Her father, who died before she returned, left this boomerang for her.

The hatband and bracelet were made by Joy Williams to celebrate her discovery of her Aboriginality. Joy was removed from her mother as a baby and put in a ‘white’ orphanage because the authorities thought she could ‘get away’ with being white. It never occurred to the authorities that she might, later in her life, choose to identify as Aboriginal. Her family is one of the prominent Aboriginal families of the Wiradjuri community of central New South Wales. The battered print of Namatjira also belongs to Joy. She bought it because Namatjira was the only Aboriginal person she had ever heard of. The scrapbooks were hers too – they contain clippings of newspaper articles about Aboriginal matters. We did not display them because of the problems associated with the exposure of such light-sensitive items as newspaper.
I also had on loan a book of Bible stories, loaned by Marie Melito-Russell. Only her foster sister, who gave her this book, made her deeply unhappy foster home bearable. We also have a poem written by Marie, and displayed in her own handwriting, responding to her finding and meeting with her mother, when Marie was in her 60s. The artworks by Cecil Bowden and Pamela Croft, and Marie Melito-Russell’s poem together give the exhibit an emotional resonance that is essential in the presentation of this story. We have no objects from parents – just as the Bringing Them Home report, which recorded many hundreds of hours of testimony from people involved in the experience of child removal, has almost no testimony from parents.³ It seems the experience as a parent of having a child, or indeed a whole family, removed, is so unbearable as to make it unspeakable.

Fig 3. Jack Tattersall’s boomerang and the text panel that accompanies it
National Museum of Australia

Object as witness

From my conversations with many members of the stolen and their families, they seem overwhelmingly to want to be believed. To have their story validated.
That is why they have a relationship with the museum through me as curator. So while they may still have ambivalent responses to the museum, for them the museum is an authorised space. They know it is a space that non-Aboriginal people believe in. Furthermore, this is not a museum; it is the national museum. The men from Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home, a notorious institution that closed in 1970, tell me ‘We want the story told. We don’t want it swept under the carpet.’ They are looking for manifestation of their experience in a public place in the nation’s museum.

Therefore, the objects that we take into the Museum for the people of the Stolen Generations are to be witnesses to them, to their version of history. It is object as witness.

This notion of object as witness influences the way we display the objects. If we were a traditional ethnographic museum, we might label Barbara Nicholson’s boomerang:

Mulga wood boomerang, probably from far western NSW, incised with marks, significance unknown. Origin unknown.

But this is how we actually describe it in the text panel next to the object:

This is all I have left from my father.

Barbara Nicholson was taken from her father when she was four years old. She never saw him again. Her father left her this boomerang, but Barbara has no idea where it came from or what the marks on it mean. Link-Up can help find people’s families and reconnect them with their Aboriginal community but some things can never be recovered.

Jack Tattersall left this boomerang for his daughter Barbara who had been taken away at aged four. When she found her way back to her community, he had died. She has no other memorabilia of him. Barbara Nicholson does not know what the marks on the boomerang mean, where it came from, or what it meant to her father. The boomerang represents the cultural loss experienced by members of the Stolen Generations. There are undoubtedly experts in the Museum who would know something of this boomerang. Barbara does not want us to tell her this kind of information because it should have come from her father. Nor have we investigated this possibility so the label on the object represents only what Barbara herself knows.

So for my clients and me, the objects I have collected are one-dimensional. They are mute voices of the Stolen Generations. That is why they are there. Other Museum objects may have a multifaceted nature – containing in themselves a variety of stories, even though initially collected for one association. The boomerang is ‘Jack Tattersall’s boomerang’ only – it has not been collected for
display in any other association with boomerangs. Clearly, this is only a partial and temporal situation, which will change with time as both Barbara and I are forgotten. However, in the present it is what they are – objects as witness to a particular story that I have called as testimony to this particular historical memory.

This account is the telling of history and memory that is placed in a particular context – that of a colonising relation. In the future, the imposition by me of this context on the task of telling may seem irrelevant, essential, erroneous, enlightening or even corrupting. But for me in this time it is the ethical basis of my work.

References
