

The *Unsettled* exhibition: Laura McBride and Mariko Smith in conversation¹

Laura McBride and Mariko Smith

Abstract: The Australian Museum's exhibition *Unsettled* opened in May 2021 (following COVID-19 pandemic-related delays) as the museum's response to 2020's 250th anniversary of Lieutenant James Cook's HMB *Endeavour* voyage along the east coast of Australia. In responding to this historical event that continues to have ramifications today, curators and community consultants framed the exhibition as an important opportunity for truth-telling led by First Nations peoples, working with artists and storytellers to put Cook in his place. In December 2021, curators Laura McBride and Dr Mariko Smith delivered the History Council of NSW's Annual History Lecture, discussing the process of creating the exhibition, considering different relationships between the museum and community, and reflecting on the histories they can tell. McBride and Smith conclude the lecture with some critical comments on the nature of museums and the importance of curatorial work to disrupt museum practice. This is an edited transcript of this conversation.

¹ This is an edited version of the 2021 Annual History Lecture, hosted by the History Council of New South Wales (HCNSW). We thank the HCNSW, particularly Catherine Shirley and Stephen Gapps, for their support for publishing this important conversation. Further details about this lecture can be found on the HCNSW website, historycouncilnsw.org.au/whats-on/events/annual-history-lecture-2021/. The full, original conversation is available for viewing as part of the History Week 2021 playlist on the HCNSW's YouTube site (youtu.be/41ogjajkeDw) where it has been split into chapters for easier viewing.

Introducing the speakers and the exhibition



Figure 1: Still image from the 2021 Annual History Lecture recording, featuring Dr Mariko Smith (left) and Laura McBride (right) in conversation, jointly prepared by the History Council of NSW and the Australian Museum.

Source: © History Council of NSW and Australian Museum.

Laura McBride

Yaama kgurra. My name is Laura McBride, and I'm a Wailwan and Kooma woman, and director, First Nations, at the Australian Museum. I was born on Gadigal Country to a Wailwan and Kooma father and an English mother who migrated here with her family at 16 years of age. I grew up between Coonamble and Sydney, undertaking my schooling here in Sydney when living with my mother, and the remaining three months of the year living with my family in Coonamble. From a young age I knew that I wanted to work closely with First Nations cultures, and always had a passion for history, science and museums. Before being appointed to the role of director, I had worked at the Australian Museum for the previous 11 years in the education, programming and exhibition teams. Through my various exhibitions, public programs and projects, I've provided an avenue for cross-cultural communication between the Aboriginal community and the museum's audiences who want to learn from First Nations peoples about Aboriginal cultures, and what Aboriginal peoples have to say on critical issues affecting our communities like climate action and sustainable living.

I see myself as a facilitator of voices rather than creating things in isolation or through consultation. Collaboration, and more accurately co-design, is the model I used across my professional work. Museums have historically been contentious places for Aboriginal people, and they often still don't trust institutions like the Australian Museum who have taken their objects, voices and even bodies, using these things

to define the narrative about us. How we have been represented over time is how we are perceived. And considering we mitigate false and negative stereotypes on a regular basis, it is vitally important that First Nations peoples are involved in the representations of themselves, their cultures and their histories.

The Australian Museum's First Nations team plays a critical role as facilitators of these voices, giving communities an influential and authoritative platform at the museum. We help provide access and pathways to First Nations peoples and cultures. My vision as director includes creating self-determining models across the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Pasifika cultural and archaeological collections. It's about prioritising and amplifying First Nations voices so that these communities represent themselves and their cultures within the museum.

Mariko Smith

Walawaani nindjiwan. My name is Mariko Smith. I'm a Yuin woman with Japanese heritage and the manager of First Nations Collections and Engagement at the museum. I'm also an honorary associate in the School of Literature, Art and Media at the University of Sydney. I was born on Darug Country in Western Sydney, and later moved north to the Central Coast. Growing up in a multicultural household from a young age, I gained an appreciation of the complexities of identity in contemporary Australia. As a child, I learned more about Japanese language and culture from my mum's side. And as I grew older, I connected more with my dad's extended Aboriginal family from La Perouse and the New South Wales South Coast. I often feel like I challenge people's perceptions of Aboriginality by just existing. I've always loved learning about history, from when I was little. I also learned about how history is complex and needs a nuanced approach in how we engage with it. I vividly remember in primary school learning about Captain Cook pretty much every year. And I have to say, I did get obsessed researching everything I could about his background and life history.

I look back at that time and reflect on how no meaningful Aboriginal perspectives were offered to us students beyond, say, making Rainbow Serpent chalk art on the pavement at school. And there was very little scope for us to critically engage with Cook and his legacy. I now see my being directed to focus solely on Cook like that was a form of brainwashing. Aboriginal peoples and cultures were portrayed as primitive and no longer relevant. It should be about presenting a more balanced, complete picture of our shared history from a range of perspectives that are not merely represented in distilled, simplistic ways. From my experience learning and practising law, to teaching at university, and now specialising in GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums), visual sociology, Indigenous cultural resurgence and public history, I seek more critical engagements with the institutions and systems in place in Australia.

Laura

We would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people as the Custodians of the land on which the Australian Museum stands. And we pay our respects to their Country, Ancestors and Elders. We dedicate the *Unsettled* exhibition to the people and other Beings who keep the law of this land, to the Elders and Traditional Owners of all the knowledges, places and stories within this exhibition, and to the Ancestors and Old People for their resilience and guidance.

We really appreciate this opportunity to share our insights into the experience of building this exhibition from the ground up. Our journey began in the context of the lead-up to the 250th anniversary of Lieutenant James Cook's east coast voyage in 1770. Many cultural institutions were planning their 2020 exhibitions to mark this event.

Mariko

The Australian Museum was in the position to host yet another Cook exhibition, focusing on the man himself and the role he was said to have played in the foundations of what is now known as 'Australia'. However, under the leadership of Kim McKay, the museum's director and CEO, and the executive leadership team, the decision was made to appoint a First Nations curator and for Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples to have a proper right of reply through this exhibition. Historically, First Nations perspectives on colonial history are often downplayed or ignored.

Laura

As the First Nations curatorial team, with Mariko as the assistant curator, we undertook extensive community consultation from the very start to ensure we accurately represented the views and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and developed this exhibition in a culturally appropriate way. This feedback would direct and inform our exhibition objectives, themes, topics, content and the associated programming.² A total of 805 First Nations people from all across Australia responded to the short survey, which sought their opinions about the Australian Museum's progress on Indigenous engagement, what they really thought of Captain Cook, as well as what they did and did not want to see in an exhibition responding to the 250th Cook anniversary.

2 Laura McBride and Mariko Smith, 'The 2020 Project First Nations Community Consultation Report', 29 June 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/cultures/the-2020-project/#download.

Mariko

Significantly, these consultations made it clear that First Nations people did not need another show about Cook. The consultation had three highest ranking categories: colonisation and its effects, to detail Australia's origins and foundations, and addressing the false constructed history that is pervasively shared in society.

Laura

This was determined from categorising 40 per cent of responses that used various descriptors, such as 'true history', 'the truth' or 'truth-telling', about Cook and Australian history. And even though we had already described the initiative on the survey documents as First Nations-led, it appeared very important for community to keep reinforcing that First Nations perspectives and experiences needed to lead this exhibition. For example, one respondent noted: 'The truth about what happened, not the fairy tale story. Aboriginal people to tell the story; we did not welcome Cook with open arms.'

Mariko

Mob told us that they did not want to be defined by the likes of Cook and colonisers. He seems to operate more so as a marker of time for the beginning of colonisation. As one of our respondents eloquently put it, 'Cook is but a small footnote in a more expansive history', whereas First Nations have been here since time immemorial.

Laura

Instead, the community asked us to take the opportunity for long overdue truth-telling about our shared past. It is clear to First Nations people that we live in a legacy of this past, and this has privileged some but left others disadvantaged, resulting in social inequity. Recognising this is an important step towards a better shared future and can only be done if we discuss this nation's history truthfully together and listen to First Nations voices.

Mariko

Through this, we had the opportunity to address some of the big questions around self-representation in public histories and museums. This raises many lines of inquiry, such as: Whose history or histories are we dealing with? Who can tell these stories? On whose authority? Are we representing or rewriting history? A key provocation for this presentation is the idea of speaking for ourselves, whether this is inside or outside the authority of institutions, or entirely on our own terms.

Laura

Now, more than ever, there are calls for cultural institutions to be more active in these important public conversations around justice, whether this is social justice or climate justice. How do we, as First Nations people, first and foremost, followed by our careers as museum workers, navigate our community-informed best industry practice approach across tensions in the divides between the personal and the professional?

The meaning of ‘Unsettled’ as the title for this exhibition

Mariko

So, Laura – ultimately the first thing that the public engaged with regarding our exhibition is the title itself: Unsettled. I think we need to start from there.

Laura

That’s right. So we had the themes and topics for the entire exhibition before we actually knew what we were going to call the exhibition itself. And we had worked with an amazing media company called IndigenousX, and together our teams brainstormed a series of titles, but essentially ‘Unsettled’ was the strongest as it has many connotations. Australia wasn’t peacefully settled. Relationships between First Nations peoples and Australians are still uneasy. Our history is unresolved.

Mariko

And our relationships with the environment – if you only just look back at the 2019–20 bushfires as well as human-created climate change – are also unsettled.

Laura

Absolutely. So, after 250 years of occupying this country, the relationship between newcomers and the environment is unstable. And when we first started discussing the title across the museum, there was a small amount of pushback from particular staff who thought that it might be a divisive title. But then there were reflections by other staff who said: ‘Well, Unsettled, that fits with me. I’m going to feel really unsettled walking through this exhibition.’ And that made us think about the ways in which the visitor really centres themselves even in a truth-telling exhibition where our people are finally getting to have their say most.

Mariko

I see 'Unsettled' as a state of being, but also as a verb is 'unsettling'. So I think it's wonderful how it just plays on so many levels.

Laura

And some of the content may be unsettling, but it's the truth. And we can't hide from that. And unsettling histories or stories can make us think about new things and new ways to move forward.

Mariko

And to have these important conversations is a provocation, but also an inspiration and a motivation.

Exhibition Section One: *Unsettled* Introduction

Laura

The *Unsettled* exhibition encourages audiences to have the ability to consider histories and perspectives that they might not know. And so the objects that were used in the introductory section raise questions or inform people about particular things that might go against stereotypes or representations that they may have thought about Aboriginal people, culture or history. One of these objects that we include is the Manly mogo.³ This 'mogo', meaning stone axe in the Sydney language, was handed over to a young girl in Manly in the 1830s.

It's one of only two known complete, pre-European hafted stone axes within museum collections, so it's a rare object having come from Sydney.⁴ Why we included this particular object is actually not because of the incredible nature of the Manly mogo itself, but the fact that Manly Cove was named after the manly and physical prowess of Aboriginal men by Governor Arthur Phillip. When the colonists wouldn't bring the long boat closer to shore in this cove to confront or engage with Aboriginal people, the Aboriginal men on the shore dropped their spears and started swimming out to the boat to confront them. And Phillip described that as very manly behaviour. This goes against stereotypes of Aboriginal people needing salvation, for instance, or the fact that Aboriginal people weren't well kept or didn't have their own societies or laws and knowledges. And so, in particular, that's why we use that object.

³ Australian Museum, 'Manly Mogo', updated 30 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/unsettled-introduction/manly-mogo/.

⁴ Attenbrow, *Sydney's Aboriginal Past*, 90; Attenbrow et al., 'Non-destructive Provenancing of Ground-Edged Mafic Artifacts', 173–86.



Figure 2: Manly mogo (stone axe), 1836. Made by Ancestor.

Metamorphic stone, wood, plant fibre. Australian Museum Collection.

Source: Abram Powell. © Australian Museum.

Mariko

Phillip and others in the First Fleet would have been familiar with the writings of Cook, Sir Joseph Banks and others on the *Endeavour*, where they wrote about Aboriginal people being these passive cowards who would just run away. And then this contrasted with Phillip's direct experiences with Aboriginal men. And so, I think even back then, people would have been thinking very differently and have different perspectives. So, that was a great story. We just wanted to draw that out and share that with the public.

Laura

Regarding the curation of this exhibition, this is the first exhibition that I've curated that has a linear order. And it's also the first exhibition I've curated in third-person language. There were reasons for this. There is so much information that people don't know about their own history. We had to put it in an order by which they could understand it or map it out with at least some anchors within their own understanding of history. Cultural exhibitions don't need a beginning and an end necessarily.

Mariko

Laura, with your previous exhibitions like *Garrigarrang: Sea Country* or *GADI*, there were multiple pathways for visitors to engage with the themes and the topics. Whereas with *Unsettled*, because it's got that sort of historical base and that chronology, 1770, 1788, other dates, it just became a more sort of linear chronological order. And we chose to write this exhibition in the third person, which is pretty standard for most exhibitions and cultural institutions and represents the voice of authority. It's the museum speaking.

Laura

That's right. In our exhibitions, we usually use first person to give audiences the understanding that Aboriginal people are still here and still in control of their narratives. But we didn't want it to be an 'us versus them' narrative. So we wrote this exhibition in the third person and it is factual, it is up to the standard of all the other exhibitions that we do at the Australian Museum. And we felt that was the best approach to take.

Exhibition Section Two: Signal Fires

Laura

The second section, 'Signal Fires', is an immersive experience. We worked with communities between the New South Wales South Coast and Sydney to capture their views on Cook, the 1770 event from the shore – and from the shore only. Signal fires are deliberately lit fires at certain locations, which are an emergency warning system to people in the area, but also for neighbouring communities that something's just not quite right. Within each section of the exhibition, we facilitated the voices of those people who are entitled to tell these stories. My family, for instance, is not from any coastal areas and so my role was as facilitator. And, for instance, within the 'Signal Fires' section, each object or story told within that section comes from a descendant of someone who lit the signal fires or whose family hold the stories of those signal fires.

Mariko

We could talk about how we curated the content. So, Laura, through your previous exhibitions, but also with this one, you curated through community. And then I guess from my perspective, with my background in academic research and history, I tended to curate from the archive, namely historical, colonial documents.

Laura

I wanted to be sure that if I was undertaking what we were calling a First Nations perspective and First Nations-led, that I wasn't led by colonial archives or records. I wanted to genuinely make sure that we were bringing our perspectives to the forefront. I was at Uncle Max Harrison's house when he first told me the story of the 'Fighting Westwind' around Ulladulla. He was telling me that before arriving in Sydney, that Cook actually tried to make landfall on the South Coast, but everybody came together and sung up the Fighting Westwind, danced up the Fighting Westwind. And when I left Uncle Max's house, I was heading back to the museum and I rang Mariko and said: 'Can you just go and have a look at the records and see if there's any alignment whatsoever?'

Mariko

Yeah, so I just hopped onto the computer because a lot of these historical records are now digitised (and we need to ensure there is more funding to make sure we could do that more!). And I looked at Cook's *Endeavour* journal and looking around in mid- to late April 1770 period when he was cruising up the coast, and there was an entry from Sunday 22 April in which he talked about seeing the smoke of fire in several places near the sea beach.

But he also said:

When we first discover'd this Island in the morning I was in hopes, from its appearance, that we should have found Shelter for the Ship behind it; but when we came to approach it near I did not think that there was even security for a Boat to land. But this, I believe, I should have attempted had not the wind come on Shore, after which I did not think it safe to send a Boat from the Ship, as we had a large hollow Sea from the South-East rowling in upon the land, which beat every where very high upon the Shore; and this we have had ever since we came upon the Coast.⁵

I feel like that really correlated with what Uncle Max was saying to Laura. This is how 'Living Legacies' – the name of this immersive experience – came about, referencing that these are the descendants; they are telling and living these stories that are from the past, but are a part of our living legacies today. So Amanda Jane Reynolds, who's an Aboriginal woman who leads Stella Stories, has worked extensively with South Coast community members to produce this beautiful film.⁶

5 Cook journal, 22 April 1770, Project Gutenberg Australia, accessed 21 December 2022, gutenberg.net.au/ebooks/e00043.html.

6 Muruwari playwright Jane Harrison presented the play *The Visitors* at the 2020 Sydney Festival, and it also engages with concept of the smoke signals, and imagines the organising that would have happened between Aboriginal groups up and down the coast in response to the British visitors: Sydney Festival, 'Sydfest 2020: The Visitors 22–26 January', 2020, sydneyfestival.org.au/events/the-visitors.

Exhibition Section Three: Contested Possession

Laura

‘Signal Fires’ really focuses on that 1770 event when Cook mapped the east coast of Australia, but really, invasion came in 1788. Now, Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples, both groups compound those events. For many, 1770 and 1788 is one and the same. So, Cook might have mapped the east coast and 18 years later, Phillip comes with the First Fleet. But essentially, when the events are compounded, it’s Cook who’s invaded. It’s this man who’s taken everything from us. And that is because Cook was actually celebrated. Not in the early colony, but really in the late 1800s, early 1900s. You see Cook start to emerge as this figure, as this hero.⁷ So that leads us into our next section, which is ‘Recognising Invasions’. Invasions did happen in this country across every Sovereign Nation. Can we first quickly speak about the Kaurareg people and their story, which I believe is not that well known, considering the significance of the site.⁸

Mariko

We know indirectly about them through the name of ‘Possession Island’, this island that’s just off the west side of what is now known as Cape York from the mainland. And this is the island where, on 22 August 1770, Cook landed and he got the flag or his crew got the flag and they basically hoisted up the colours and claimed the east coast; the west coast they could not claim because of the Dutch navigators who’d previously been there, but Cook claimed the east coast in the name of King George III of Great Britain.⁹ So we only really know about this island, that it’s just been renamed as Possession Island.

Laura

But most people would think that possession of Australia was taken at La Perouse or Botany Bay, right?

⁷ See also other commentaries, such as the film *Too Many Captain Cooks* (1989), Ronin Films, www.roninfilms.com.au/feature/604/too-many-captain-cooks.html.

⁸ The National Museum of Australia also shared stories from the island now known commonly as ‘Possession Island’ in their exhibition *Endeavour Voyage* (2020–21), ‘Bedanug, Thunadha, Bedhan Lag, Tuidin – Possession Island’, accessed 21 December 2022, www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/endeavour-voyage/bedanug-thunadha-bedhan-lag-tuidin-possession-island.

⁹ ‘Having satisfied myself of the great Probability of a passage, thro’ which I intend going with the Ship, and therefore may land no more upon this Eastern coast of New Holland, and on the Western side I can make no new discovery, the honour of which belongs to the Dutch Navigators, but the Eastern Coast from the Latitude of 38 degrees South down to this place, I am confident, was never seen or Visited by any European before us.’ Cook journal, 22 August 1770, gutenberg.net.au/ebooks/e00043.html.

Mariko

You'd think so because that's where the first landfall was, on 29 April. Four months or so earlier – you'd think that would've happened then. There's a lot of these sorts of inconsistencies or things that just kind of don't add up. And so why would it be all the way in August at this particular island that possession was said to have happened? And this island is known by many names including Tuined. And we have been told this by senior men from the Kaurareg First Nation people. We worked very closely with Uncle Waubin Richard Aken. He's also the appointed tribal historian. So it was just such a privilege to speak with Uncle Waubin and learn from him.

And he was telling Laura and me about how Cook did not land on their island. We also looked at Joseph Banks's journal as well and he talks about these 10 warriors being on the shore watching them.¹⁰ And so nine had lances, so that means spears, and one had a bow and arrow set. And when we talked to Uncle Waubin, he was saying to us that, yes, the warriors were watching because they knew that this ship was going to come, they had the warnings from what he called the 'Blackfella Internet', so with the signal fires, but also message sticks and messengers who were coming up the coast.¹¹ And they knew something was coming so they were waiting on the shore. And they were waiting for their leader to give the signal, basically, if these strangers were to disembark and try and arrive on the shore, they would have attacked.

Laura

So you have *Endeavour* passengers, James Maria (Mario) Matra and Banks who were keeping really solid records across the whole journey. And yet the account of possession, on Possession Island, on the island itself, doesn't seem to be in their records. So, there's several things here. There are different accounts, but also the fact that people don't even know that the possession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait lands now known as the east coast of Australia took place on this island off the west coast of Cape York. Why do we not know this history as Indigenous Australians or non-Indigenous Australians, more openly?

Mariko

We do reflect upon how it is a contested history. We call this subsection in the beginning of this 'Recognising Invasions' section 'Contested Possession', because there are various accounts of this one event and these accounts don't necessarily corroborate; they can conflict, which is what you see here when Uncle Waubin said

10 'We saw 10 Indians standing on a hill; 9 were armed with lances as we had been used [*sic*] to see them, the tenth had a bow and arrows.' Cook journal, 21 August 1770, gutenberg.net.au/ebooks05/0501141h.html.

11 See Australian Museum, 'Sovereignty, False Pretences without the Rightful Consent', updated 3 September 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/recognising-invasions/sovereignty/.

they did not land because what would have happened is they would have speared them. And Cook in particular, they would have just cut off his head and boiled it and then they would trade with Papua New Guinea because there were a lot of those connections with the other cultures and peoples from New Guinea to Melanesia, Asia as well, and this head would have had trade value.

Laura

The ‘Recognising Invasions’ section then goes on and deals primarily with what we see as colonial records and voices, because in this particular theme and topic what we were addressing went back to the consultation where First Nations people asked us what went on between 1770 and 1788, and why did they think they had the right to come here and do this.

Mariko

It’s interesting that there are people who think that Cook came with the First Fleet in 1788, but in fact he was dead nearly nine years before – he died in Hawaii in 1779. And 1779 was also a year that the British Parliament were debating about convict transportation because they had this big social problem of convicts and at the same time the American Revolutionary War. So there are all these factors that kind of played into the decision of why New South Wales was picked as a British colony.

Laura

What I think we should talk about here is the complete erasure of James Matra, who the Sydney suburb of Matraville is named after. We find out that really, it’s Matra who, more so than Cook, was a key player in the colonisation of Australia and for really quite personal purposes.

Mariko

And that’s something that we draw out with the ‘Plans for a Colony’ sub-section. So having on display Sir Joseph Banks’s testimony to the 1779 Bunbury Parliamentary Committee on convict transportation, but also Matra’s own proposal that he brought to the table to British Parliament. And we show an example of what is an agenda note from a British cabinet meeting where Matra wanted to bring this up.¹²

12 Select Committee on Convicts, *Report of the Select Committee on Convicts 1779*; McNab, ‘James Maria Matra’s Proposal’, *Historical Records of New Zealand*, Vol. I, 35–46, nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-McN01Hist-t1-front-d1-d1.html. See Australian Museum, ‘Plans for a Colony’, updated 31 September 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/recognising-invasions/plans-for-a-colony/.

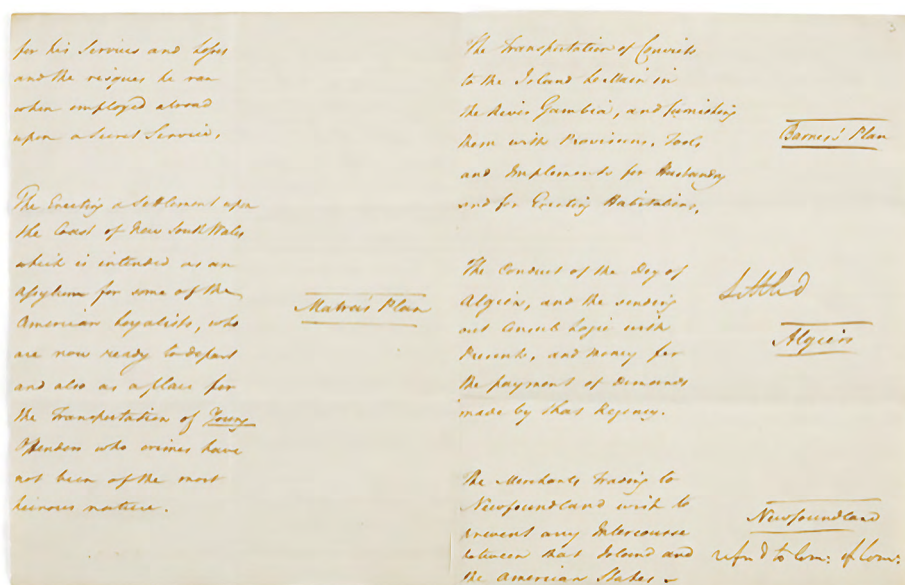


Figure 3: Sir Evan Nepean, 'Memo of Matters to Be Brought before Cabinet', c. November 1874. Ink on paper.

Loaned from the State Library of New South Wales for the *Unsettled* exhibition.

Source: Australian Museum.

Laura

So often we're told Australia is a population of convicts and it was harsh for convicts to come here and this was essentially the beginning. But really Australia was selected because land was needed. It was in a good position of the world in trade for spices and other goods, this was mentioned also in parliamentary records.¹³ And so we need to think about what circumstances were going on and stop trying to place this false narrative. When Matra was corresponding with Lord Sydney, he later wrote 'it was observed that New South Wales would be a very proper region for the reception of criminals condemned to transportation'¹⁴ as what was happening at the time involved many prison hulks in London, blocking other ships from coming in and therefore blocking the economy.

13 See Tink, 'The Role of Parliamentary Committee Witnesses in the Foundation of Australia', 33–38.

14 McNab, 'James Maria Matra's Proposal'. See Australian Museum, 'James Maria Matra', updated 3 September 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/recognising-invasions/plans-for-a-colony/#James-Maria-Matra.

Exhibition Section Four: Fighting Wars

Laura

Something that came out strongly in the consultation material was telling the truth about the wars. Wars were fought in this country. People fought for their families, their homelands and their cultures. 'Fighting Wars' is then the next section of the *Unsettled* exhibition, where we specifically look at the definition of war itself, what that is, and investigate where wars were fought in this country.

Mariko

Yes, that's right, because I think that's something people would just say: 'Oh, well, it doesn't fit the definition of war.'

Laura

But it's interesting, isn't it, Mariko, with the fact that people say, 'Well, in regards to this definition of war', but actually that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about an intention. We're talking about a military campaign, and Australia was colonised with a high amount of military.

Mariko

Well, that's it. Starting off as a penal colony, but there was a strong military presence. And then the fact that, I think, the first five colonial governors of New South Wales were military men. They all had distinguished records in the army. Just thinking of Governor Macquarie who we deal with later on. I think he was in colonial India. And so he applied a lot of those military tactics in how he engaged with the so-called 'hostile natives'. We were looking at a lot of that language through material of the time, like there were newspapers that actually used the word 'war'.¹⁵ This is why it's a little bit funny when people just go, 'it wasn't a war'.

Laura

Everybody living at the time was describing their experience as living in a war. And so, although *Unsettled* is a First Nations' perspective, we include several sources that illustrate perspectives of people at the time, as well as maps illustrating conflict. If we look at something like the Warrego Map, which identified areas of New South Wales in which people were trying to farm and grow the economy, there were safe

¹⁵ Australian Museum, 'Fighting Wars', updated 5 October 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/fighting-wars/.

pathways marked on this map that are blocked by logos that have spears as identifiers to say ‘don’t go here’ – there are savage natives or savage Aborigines in the area still defending their territories. So they mark two main things: waterless country and where the Aboriginal people were still able to defend their territories.¹⁶ What’s quite interesting is Bourke in far-west New South Wales; when looking at this map, Bourke is marked as ‘Fort Bourke’. And so there are these things that drop out of history, they’re forgotten or they’re deliberately forgotten ...



Figure 4: Raymond Timbery (Bidjigal Dharrawal) and Joel Deaves (Gumea Dharrawal), Death Spear, 2021.

Silcrete, resin, plant fibre, sinew, shell, mingo (grass tree). Australian Museum Collection Acquisition. Source: Abram Powell. © Raymond Timbery and Joel Deaves; photograph from Australian Museum.

We started with the first war, the Sydney Wars, which raged across what’s known now as the Sydney Basin for 29 years. A period of warfare and non-warfare. Diplomatic attempts were taken across this time. This is where you see Governor Macquarie start to give out breastplates at the native feasts in order to try and get people onside to establish a system of leadership and cooperation where they would like to talk to one person instead of several different people, the opening of the Native Institute and a whole range of different things. But still Aboriginal people weren’t conforming. And then we have heroes in this story such as Pemulwuy, who has such an important story. And there’s a particular turning point in that Sydney War where Pemulwuy spears the colony’s gamekeeper, McIntyre. And so we worked with some Bidjigal descendants, Raymond Timbery and Joel Deaves, to recreate a death spear. There

¹⁶ Australian Museum, ‘The Approach to the Warrego Country map, c. 1845’, updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/fighting-wars/warrego-country-map/.

are no death spears within museum collections that we know of. So the men used colonial records, as well as speaking to their Elders, to recreate an object like the one used by Pemulwuy on that day to spear the colony's gamekeeper.¹⁷

Mariko

Some of the research we undertook was looking at archaeological writings about what sort of material was used. We used some of those colonial documents to help us describe, I think it's like silcrete, shells, a yellow substance which I think would be resin from Gadi (grass tree). We talked to the community members and provided this information, but then gave them that sort of autonomy. And it's part of that self-determining practices as well, like communities tell these stories.

Laura

Communities take colonial records that may include information that was lost throughout the colonisation process and then they have to put it back together through their Elders and their cultural lens to really interpret what's happening there. But this is a lot of how cultural revitalisation is working within museums – for example, the revitalisation of nawi making, which is the tied-bark canoe from the east coast here, or possum skin cloak making – all very much the same coming in to use the collections themselves, archival records, as well as living cultural knowledge to be able to revitalise these cultural practices.

But really, what I want to talk about here, because it leads us to our next section, is where we are at the end of that Sydney War. We're at 26, 27 years in, and there is a significant event that sets the pathway for the colonisation of the rest of Australia. The governor and many other people are fed up by this time. Can you tell us what you found in the records, particularly around the Appin massacre?

Mariko

I think 1816 is a key year. So Governor Lachlan Macquarie, who we've spoken about – how he was a military man, a very experienced strategist. He wrote in his Governor's Memorandum and Diary book of the 'hostile natives', the problems they pose and how he has tried in frustration to really control and manage the situation by trying to negotiate with them, but then it's come to the point where there needs to be punitive action.¹⁸ And so he gave instructions to a number of military detachments to basically carry out punitive expeditions, which was to punish Aboriginal people who did not conform to his societal order he was trying to implement.

17 Australian Museum, 'The Sydney Wars', updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/fighting-wars/sydney-wars/.

18 Australian Museum, 'The Appin Massacre', updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/fighting-wars/appin-massacre/.

Laura

But within those records, Mariko, what we find is also some cover-ups, right?

Mariko

That's right. So he gave very clear instructions to the three leaders of those detachments that were meant to go across south-west Sydney, that they were only meant to respond by firing if there was resistance, they were meant to spare women and children. It was very clear, like he was trying to follow this particular sort of rules of warfare. And with Appin, in regards to Captain James Wallis, who led a detachment through south-west Sydney, they ended up carrying out a night raid. And so, what opportunity was there for the men, women and children who were camping to offer up any resistance?¹⁹

Laura

But what I'm talking about is the cover-up in the records: the fact that when writing back to England, when they know innocent women and children have died, but that's all covered up. But what's really interesting is we can look at the evidence within museums and from the three people that were hung in the trees – we know that one of those people was a female.

Mariko

That's right. We are presented with various accounts. You had Governor Macquarie's instructions, you had Wallis's diary entry from that fateful night, but also how Macquarie reported back to his superior, the Earl of Bathurst. And also there was a young boy who lived in that area and he was around when the news of this massacre happened. And as an old man, he wrote his recollections about this event – William Byrne wrote that there were three bodies, not the two that Wallis had reported back to Macquarie. It was all these little discrepancies in play. And then also the way that Macquarie reported back to the Earl of Bathurst was that Wallis met some resistance and that's why they responded in that way.

Laura

The Appin massacre essentially sets a pathway, doesn't it? A pathway for massacres to become the key tool to be used across the rest of the colonisation process in Australia.

19 Australian Museum, 'The Appin Massacre'.

Exhibition Section Five: Remembering Massacres

Mariko

There is Governor Macquarie's proclamation not long after the Appin massacre, where basically he's declaring de facto war on the Aboriginal people in New South Wales.²⁰ And a lot of what he was stipulating in this proclamation was around controlling the movement of Aboriginal people; it has all the hallmarks of later protectionist policies. So more of this way of just trying to strike out at all this resistance and just really suppress that. It indicated the strategy at play, which as the colony expanded, the violence and the massacres continued to follow. So that leads us into 'Remembering Massacres'. Did you want to speak to us about this section, Laura?

Laura

Absolutely. Massacres are a completely unhealed element of conversation in communities. In Australia, we live in towns where roads, bridges, libraries or institutions are named after people who perpetrated massacres but are lauded in local histories as heroes who set up these towns. It's once again the different perspectives of history. In this section of the exhibition we utilise the University of Newcastle's study.

Mariko

Yes. That's the massacre mapping project. From those early years of the colony, 1788 up to the last documented massacre, which was, I believe 1928.²¹ The research team mapped documented massacres. They define massacre in a very particular way. I really encourage you all to look at their website where they've got the full scope of what they were researching. It doesn't include all the undocumented massacres, we just had to be mindful of that. But what is really powerful about how their data were being presented in the massacre map that's in *Unsettled* is the extent and the spread of the colony and the illustration of the violence that went hand in hand with it.

Laura

Essentially, you can see that massacres align directly with the colonisation of Australia, but the massacre map is data and data can work in many forms for particular people. Historians love data, scientists love data, but what do our visitors think? If they see this map light up red with all the massacres, are they really empathising with those data? So right next to that, within the exhibition design, we actually have images of landscapes where massacres occurred. And what type of photography was used in those photos, Mariko?

²⁰ Australian Museum, 'The Appin Massacre'.

²¹ Ryan et al., *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia 1788 to 1930*, Vol. 2.1, University of Newcastle, 2018, c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/introduction.php.



Figure 5: Rottnest Island prison, Western Australia, 1838–1931.

'The Quad' on Rottnest Island, built with forced labour by the Aboriginal prisoners. The site of executions and many brutalities. Originally the prison where many hundreds died in misery, this building was turned into a hotel and only closed in 2018. Reproduction of the photograph. Australian Museum Collection Digital Acquisition.

Source: Photograph by Brendan Beirne. © Brendon Beirne.



Figure 6: Hawkesbury River, 1790s.

Reproduction of the photograph. Australian Museum Collection Digital Acquisition.

Source: Photograph by Brendan Beirne. © Brendon Beirne.

Mariko

It was this sort of infrared technology, because it is black-and-white photos that are just very stark. It's unnerving, actually, to look at it. It's not quite like how we would see these places in every day. So I think our visitors would be reflecting upon this imagery by photographer Brendan Beirne in his *Dark Days* photographic series.²²

Laura

It's like an image of somewhere you've gone on a holiday. It's an image of, say, your parents' property; these are familiar sites. And so we have the map and show some of the sites/landscapes. It just raises the question for those visitors, that the areas in which we live, work and play have these hidden histories.

That takes us to some of the other records that we include in this area. The fact that Aboriginal people are often told that, well, at the time of colonisation life was hard on both sides, and that's just the way it was. Can you talk about the Myall Creek letter and why that's not necessarily the case?

Mariko

The Myall Creek letter was by a Sydneysider writing back to a relative in England. They were following the 1838 trial of the people responsible for the Myall Creek massacre. This person had followed the trial and also witnessed the later executions. And even by that standard, they knew it was wrong to kill innocent men, women and children in cold blood.

Laura

Can you just tell us a little bit about what we found in Emily Creaghe's diary?

Mariko

Emily Creaghe is someone who's celebrated as a trailblazer. The first white woman to have ventured west into what is the Gulf Country area. She wrote about Aboriginal people, describing cruel acts towards them, whether it's about tying up an Aboriginal woman or going to a homestead and seeing 40 pairs of Aboriginal people's ears nailed on the wall, in a way that normalised the cruelty towards Aboriginal people.²³

22 Australian Museum, 'Dark Days: A Photo Essay by Brendan Beirne', updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/dark-days-brendan-beirne/.

23 Australian Museum, 'Emily Caroline Creaghe's Diary, 1883', updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/remembering-massacres/emily-caroline-creaghe-diary/.

Laura

A woman was brought in on the back of a horse tied up by a rope and they tied her to the tree, and the whole time she was trying to escape. Emily Creaghe wrote things like, 'I don't understand why she doesn't like her new life. We've literally gone out there and got this savage and brought her onto the property where she's going to have a great life', her descriptions are very typical of similar perspectives today: Why don't Aboriginal people learn to live like this? Or why don't Aboriginal people conform like this?

Leaving the 'Fighting Wars' and 'Remembering Massacres' sections we deal with two quite important points. The first I want to discuss with you is the concept of 'Lest We For/Get Over It' (which is technically part of 'Fighting Wars').²⁴

Mariko

This is a great illustration by artist Sam Wallman, which incorporates both 'lest we forget', as we say every year on Anzac Day to always remember the sacrifices made by Australian men and women in overseas conflict, and also 'get over it', which is something that Aboriginal people hear constantly, particularly around Invasion Day, our Day of Mourning and remembering the people who have fallen with the frontier wars and massacres. So as a combination it is a way of saying there are discrepancies but also the hypocrisy as well.²⁵

Laura

Colonisation didn't happen in the distant past. In fact, colonisation is still ongoing. Now, considering within the massacre mapping project that a significant amount of massacres were undertaken by police and military, there's been no healing of that relationship in recent times. And that leads us into very similar issues we're having with deaths in custody and an average of a death in custody once every three weeks.

Mariko

So there is this Tony Albert glasswork piece featured, based on an earlier photographic series he did called *Brothers*.²⁶ He saw a group of Aboriginal men at a 2012 protest rally against police brutality with targets painted on their chest. Tony was really struck by that imagery. And so through his photography and now this glasswork he has represented this. And I think doing it in that stained glass medium as well, it communicates that idea about the people who get to be commemorated in that way, like saints and royalty; it's very striking.

²⁴ Australian Museum, 'Lest We For/Get Over It', updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/fighting-wars/lest-we-forget-over-it/.

²⁵ Australian Museum, 'Lest We For/Get Over It'.

²⁶ Australian Museum, 'Brothers (The Prodigal Son II) 2020', updated 31 August 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/remembering-massacres/brothers-the-prodigal-son/.



Figure 7: Tony Albert (Girramay, Kuku Yalanji), *Brothers (The Prodigal Son II)*, 2020.

Glass, lead, photographic decal, steel, stone. Australian Museum Collection Acquisition.

Source: Abram Powell. © Tony Albert; Australian Museum (image).

Exhibition Section Six: Surviving Genocide

Mariko

So, Laura, our next section is ‘Surviving Genocide’. And genocide is this word that a lot of people do feel confronted by. It’s a legal term as well, and it was really important to unpack what we mean by this.²⁷ The fact is, genocide is what happened here in Australia. If you look at the UN definition of what genocide is, what happened in Australia fits all those categories.

Laura

It was important for us to establish what definition we were working within. A major component of genocide is the removal of people from their traditional lands onto missions, reserves and stations. This section features numerous objects, but I’d like to speak about one in particular that’s connected to my family. My father was born in a fringe camp at Montkeila Bend in Walgett in 1957. Some people think that colonisation and these events happened a long time ago, but I’m the first generation in my family to be born off missions and reserves.

His upbringing was in what our family would call a camp. And we felt it was interesting to start to explore some of those textures and feelings around what was going on in missions and reserves. My father and I collected tin from an old mission and my father constructed a miniature fringe camp wall to identify the types of houses, places and spaces that Aboriginal people were living in at this particular time. Within this section, we also talk about domestic servitude, the fact that Aboriginal people made the best with what they had, featuring some hessian bags. And so we look at multiple different elements of people’s experiences on missions and reserves to give a more holistic story. But for each object, exhibition or quote within the show, we actually co-designed and facilitated that work with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

Mariko

So the next topic is Stolen Generations. Now that is a topic that many Australians are familiar with.

27 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, ‘Genocide’, accessed 21 December 2022, www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml.

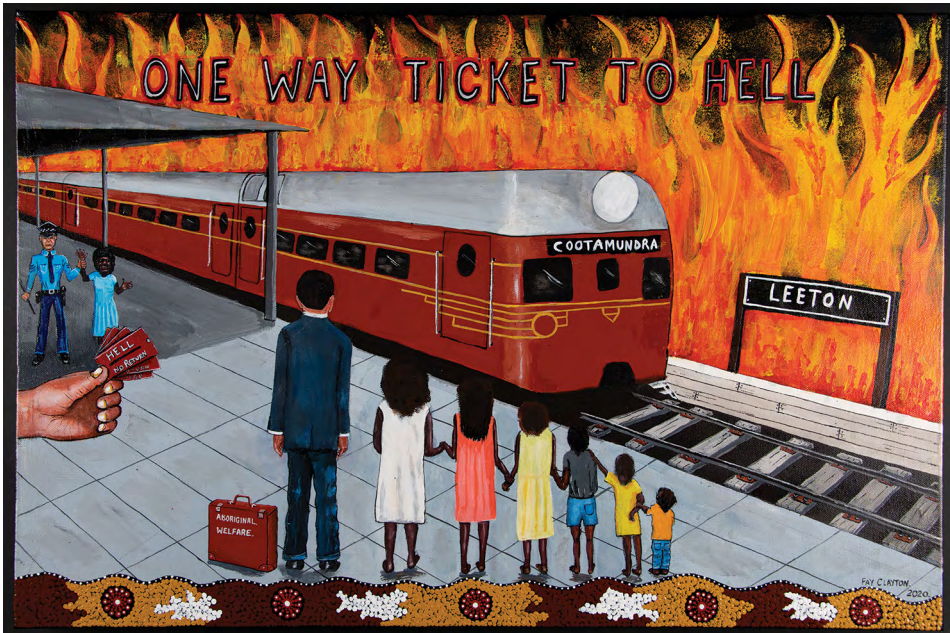


Figure 8: Aunty Fay Moseley (Wiradjuri), *One Way Ticket to Hell*, 2012–20.

Acrylic on canvas. Reproduction of the artwork.

Source: Australian Museum Collection Digital Acquisition. © Aunty Fay Moseley.

Laura

That's right. And it's one people can relate to regarding the genocide definition itself. We worked with surviving members of the Stolen Generations so that they could tell their stories. Each piece in the Stolen Generation section touches on a first-person story. And we were honoured to present these stories, some of which we knew and some of which we learned through the *Unsettled* curation process. Aunty Fay Moseley's painting, *Ticket to Hell*, shows her and her siblings being taken to a train station and removed to Central Station in the first instance, and then onto Kinchela Boys' Home and Cootamundra Girls' Home from there.²⁸

What is important about this piece is that there's often this idea that Aboriginal children were taken for their own good. But if you look at someone like Aunty Fay Moseley whose father was a Rat of Tobruk, he had an exemption certificate, both her parents worked full time at the cannery, and her grandmother actually owned their home – they conformed to the criteria of what White Australia required from them, but the children were still taken away.

²⁸ Australian Museum, 'Stolen Generations', updated 1 September 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/surviving-genocide/stolen-generations/.

Aunty Fay describes it very briefly and quite interestingly by saying, 'It wasn't about giving me an education. I was an A grade student. They wanted to make me D grade, D for domestic service'. It's these personal stories that we find makes *Unsettled* so strong.

Exhibition Section Seven: Continued Resistance

Mariko

This section refers to how we have always been resisting. It's never stopped. From artistic resistance to cultural resistance.

Laura

Political resistance, resistance across the frontier at the brunt of colonisation across Australia. We deal with a range of different types of resistance, and in particular, ongoing resistance starting in 1788 continuing through to today in 2021.

Mariko

This section also investigates who gets commemorated in our history. One of your favourite pieces, *Blood Money*, investigates who we commemorate on our notes of currency and history, and how we can focus on the resistance fighters that we look up to.²⁹

Laura

Blood Money is one of my favourite pieces within the *Unsettled* exhibition. Blood money is often used to describe money obtained at the cost of another's life. This series by Dr Ryan Presley explores the extent to which Australia's wealth has been built on a history of exploitation and violence. Arguably, the bulk of Australia's economy functions off Aboriginal dispossession. On some notes, the dollar value is replaced by the infinity symbol, a gesture to the ongoing and unquantifiable damage brought by colonisation. The version of history represented on Australia's currency is primarily that of white settler figures. In contrast, *Blood Money* promotes important Aboriginal people, testifying to their intelligence and resilience; their legitimate actions standing in contrast to the many colonial myths that Aboriginal people were passive and lacked the will to resist colonial encroachment.

29 Australian Museum, 'Blood Money', updated 29 November 2021, accessed 21 December 2022, australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/continued-resistance/sovereignty/.



Figure 9: Ryan Presley (Marri Ngarr), *Blood Money – Fifty Dollar Note – Fanny Balbuk Commemorative*, 2011.

Source: Australian Museum Collection Digital Acquisition. © Dr Ryan Presley.

I first saw *Blood Money* at the Tarnanthi festival in 2019 and was just taken aback by them. I thought they were some of the greatest pieces of art that I'd seen, and bringing them into the museum and a little bit outside of that art gallery context was to associate each of these *Blood Money* pieces with a cultural object. Let's take for instance someone like Fanny Balbuk. There was the first time I had heard Fanny Balbuk's story. Fanny Balbuk is a resistance fighter, a Noongar woman from Western Australia. And we went to our collections to see if we could find a wanna, a Noongar digging stick, to associate with this *Blood Money* piece. But actually we only found a metal wanna. Which was unsuitable for us, wasn't it, Mariko?

Mariko

Oh, yes, that's right. And so this was another opportunity for us because we wanted to work with communities, and this was a really great opportunity to support communities in this way because *Unsettled* has that potential to really impact on socio-economic outcomes as well. And so by commissioning a work from a Noongar artist, Heidi Mippy, we were able to include a wanna and also make a really great network with Noongar mob.

Laura

At the back end of 'Continued Resistance', we have a really strong self-determining piece representing male Ancestors and the role they played in resistance and survival called *Keeper of the Law, Keeper of the Song, Keeper of the Dance* by Jai Darby Walker. I had been watching Jai undertake his artistic practice on social media for a number of years and he has this amazing talent to be able to capture the look and feel and spirit of the Old People. There were these fantastic old warriors that when I saw

them I said they have to go in *Unsettled* and I wasn't quite sure in what way or at one point, because a lot of *Unsettled* changed as we developed the exhibition. Having conversations and looking at our collections and working with certain artists. And this was a really good opportunity for us to also critique the Australian Museum and cultural institutions' role in how they define and represent our cultures.

Mariko

It's not just to expect the Australian public to embark on a journey of truth-telling, our institutions need to be a part of this as well, and the Australian Museum is no different. We need to critically reflect upon the Australian Museum's own practices of representation of Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples and cultures. And often when these great cultural objects enter museums they get decontextualised, stripped of all their cultural meanings. Often the information about how they were made and who by has just been stripped away and ignored, discarded. And once they come into the museum registration process, they become simplified into something part of the taxonomy system. They become a 'club' in our collections, for example, where we are showing a display of so-called 'clubs', but we see them as law sticks and they're much more complex than just being classified as a hunter/gatherer tool.

Laura

This classification gives it a very savage and simplistic nature when in fact these are very complex, very detailed, engraved objects that we know weren't used for clubbing things. They fit well with these old men of Jai's artwork, these old Ancestors at the back of the exhibition, and essentially the objects and these people represented in the artworks have all been disenfranchised by this history and by collecting institutions such as ours.

Further to being classified in this way, these clubs are also listed with 'maker unknown'. Often the individual was disenfranchised in the collecting process and 'maker unknown' is one of the most common descriptions under 'Maker' in museum records. There have been previous exhibitions and work completed by other First Nations curators and people in the GLAM sector with this use of stating 'made by Ancestor'. We also now use that term because although we don't know who the maker is, we can at least respect and acknowledge that that maker is an Ancestor of people who are likely very much living today.



Figure 10: ‘Continued Resistance’ section of the *Unsettled* exhibition. Detail: *Keeper of the Law, Keeper of the Song, Keeper of the Dance*, 2014, by Jai Darby Walker (Bundjalung) and selection of wooden clubs made by Ancestors from the Australian Museum collection.

Source: James Alcock. © Jai Darby Walker; photograph from Australian Museum.

Exhibition Section Eight: Healing Nations

Laura

How do you end an exhibition like this, right? Australia has a heavy history. It’s a lived history for us and there’s a lot of emotions involved, but there needs to be some really positive outcomes that people think they can achieve.

Mariko

It’s about empowering people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to work together to consider how we can learn from this really difficult history and work towards a better present and a better shared future. It’s about birthing a new Australia, essentially.

Laura

That’s right. And in the lead-up to *Unsettled*, we had been running some deep listening workshops with Milan Dhiiyaan, a cultural company that operates out of central New South Wales. We found these incredibly valuable to our audiences. And we

thought if we could capture in some way that experience to end this exhibition on, we may be able to give people a space in which they can reflect but also take away some really important messages. And it was the community themselves, 68 Aboriginal people from different communities who worked with us on developing *Winhangadurinya*.

Mariko

So *Winhangadurinya* means ‘deep listening’, ‘reflecting’, ‘meditation’ in Wiradjuri language. And so this part of *Unsettled* really shows me how great it is to be a curator, how we can pull together something like this, but it didn’t happen in the museum space, we had to do this with community on Country, then bring it into the museum under their guidance.

Laura

We held women’s workshops with the female Elders, teaching us certain elements of culture, but also discussing the design of this space and what it would need to encompass. And the men then did the same as well.

Mariko

And everything had to be just right. The designs had to be accurate and appropriate. So working with the various Elders – the men and the women – but also even just collecting the materials, the wood itself, that was such a process as well, done with cultural permissions.

So where to now, Laura?

Laura

Well, I’m not sure it’s a ‘where to now’ question. I think that comes where people think that *Unsettled* was something at the beginning. Really, *Unsettled* is part of a larger disruption strategy that the First Nations staff have within the Australian Museum. Not disruption in a bad way, but if we don’t disrupt these systems within cultural institutions, then there will be no productive change.

We’re essentially trying to neutralise the museum space, because museums have never been neutral. So now that Aboriginal people have had a say on the Cook anniversary and the legacy of colonisation, I would like to see that we become much more self-determining across our natural history and science exhibitions. *Unsettled* is part of a larger journey and I’m just incredibly privileged that we were able to facilitate the voices and achieve discussion on those themes and topics that so many people in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community wanted from us. It’s an incredible

honour to be able to take part in this work when you know how many people before you have tried to achieve these same goals. So really we are just following in their footsteps and continuing work that started essentially in 1788.

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