

# Objects and Object-like: The Representation of Indigenous Culture Through Music in Bunjilaka's *First Peoples* Gallery

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Bunjil sent the ancestor spirits to create the world ... he sung the country ... they made the mountains and valleys ... he sung all the creatures ... they made all the creeks and rivers ... he sung the people ... Bunjil sung the Law ... how to be in country ... how to care for family and children ... to remember our ancestors and old people.

We dance. We sing. To remember. To respect. To uphold. We become. We are.

Excerpt from *Bunjil's Wings*/Creation Cinema script (English text),  
Bunjilaka

Music is a persistent feature of museum practice and production, but is often an afterthought, a soundtrack created around a pre-existing narrative. Music can drive engagement and facilitate immersion if successful, or alienate the visitor if unsuccessful. Because of this power, it deserves careful consideration at all stages of exhibition development. It is a gift to the museum practitioner, with the potential to communicate emotional content or knowledge without requiring perfect cultural understanding on the part of the listener. It can also break through from the background, emerging from 'soundtrack' status into something with an almost physical, object-like presence, as is the case with Bunjilaka's *First Peoples*.

This article illustrates some of the ways in which Indigenous<sup>1</sup> culture and music are negotiated and presented in a museum space through an analysis of the redevelopment of the Bunjilaka *First Peoples* gallery at Melbourne Museum and the musical installations included within this space.<sup>2</sup> In this case study, I explore some of the ways in which museums aim to represent Aboriginal cultural values, and how a new collaborative curatorial model has arisen through the project: a model particular to the corporate microculture of Museum Victoria, but also part of a new direction in ‘bicultural museology’.<sup>3</sup>

Following a brief history of the emergence and redevelopment of Bunjilaka at Melbourne Museum, I explore the significant role of sound and music within that redevelopment, highlighting some of the important implications this has for discussions of music in museums more broadly, as well as within a particular Indigenous Australian context. In particular, the key topics discussed in this article include cultural representation as cultural practice through the writing of new music to accompany old ways; the intersection between object and sound; the ways that music meshes with the materiality of museum installation practice; and finally, a brief exploration of music and affect using songs of grief to narrate a difficult story of loss and violence. These analyses are formed through observations made and conversations held as an employee of Museum Victoria located within the site of redevelopment but as an outsider to the redevelopment project itself.

### **Bunjilaka and its Redevelopment**

Historically, museums, being built on a foundation of white and generally male academic practice, were institutions founded and operated within a solidly colonial space. This led to academic and curatorial practices that were marginalising and dehumanising to people located outside of that academy. These range from the obvious and recently newsworthy—stolen ancestral remains and their repatriation, for example—to the more subtle but equally damaging: the placement of indigenous peoples as biological phenomena in the ‘natural history’ or evolutionary galleries (and away from things social, historical or cultural) and the insistence on a segregation of their cultural material from any other scientific or cultural context.

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘[I/i]ndigenous’ is not a neutral term and has been criticised for its tendency towards homogenisation. See Francesca Merlan, ‘Indigeneity, Global and Local,’ *Current Anthropology* 50 (2009): 303; ‘Titta Seacombe’, Bunjilaka Melbourne Museum, Museum Victoria website, <<https://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/yulendj/biographies/titta-secombe/>>. Bearing this in mind, I will use the word to refer to or describe *general* issues of colonised cultures and First Peoples. Where I refer to Australian Indigenous identity, I use ‘Aboriginal people’ (and ‘Torres Strait Islander people’ if appropriate). Where a specific nation or group is being discussed, I use Bunjilaka and Museum Victoria’s terminology, using specific nation and language group names where given. Whilst it holds objects, stories and information from all over Aboriginal Australia, Bunjilaka has a focus on indigenous groups of South East Australia, and particularly the Kulin Nation (which includes the location of present-day Melbourne), a confederacy of the Wathaurung, Woiwurrung, Taungurung, Dja Dja Wurrung, and Boonwurrung groups.

<sup>2</sup> For this preliminary study, which forms part of a doctoral thesis on music in museums, I have drawn on material available to me through my fifteen-year history in the museum sector and through contacts developed through my work with Museum Victoria. This modified ethnographic approach incorporates elements of participant observation (although I was not part of this redevelopment project), and data collection through informal conversations with curatorial staff, media releases, and published literature.

<sup>3</sup> Marilena Alivizatou uses the term ‘bicultural museology’ to refer to the work of the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. As she notes, this museum is rooted in a broader social biculturalism that dates back to the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. See Marilena Alivizatou, *Intangible Heritage and the Museum: New Perspectives on Cultural Preservation* (London: Left Coast Press, 2012).

There is a problematic history of indigenous peoples' experience with the Western museum institution and the cultural heritage sector. An example of the marginalisation of non-European cultures can be found in the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith. She describes her family's aversion to ethnographic museum collections, stating that, 'Many other Maori people, I was aware, were scared of what lay in the cupboards, of whose bones and whose ancestors were imprisoned in the cases.'<sup>4</sup> Another example is proposed by Laurajane Smith, who has created an analytical tool she refers to as Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), and uses this to illustrate how traditional museological and cultural arts and practices—including the gazetting of Intangible Cultural Heritage—have marginalised some of the very people they sought to describe or represent (but not necessarily *engage* with).<sup>5</sup>

Founded in 1864, Melbourne Museum was created only twenty years after John Batman first claimed the land that became Melbourne. The legacy of settler colonialism persisted through the decades, with past practices of classification that are still reflected, if not in current practice and structures, in the ways that they impact people working in and with the institution. Whilst the museum does not necessarily claim that it is a postcolonial institution, attempts to decolonise are part of an ongoing process. For example, it is relatively recently that steps have been taken to integrate Indigenous local knowledge and stories into all aspects of displayed natural and social histories, rather than confining them to specific spaces in the museum. As a public-facing research officer with Museum Victoria during this period, I have noted mixed audience reactions to this integrative approach, with the occasional visitor complaining, for example, that, 'Aboriginal myth isn't science' and should therefore be kept away from display spaces and galleries such as the Planetarium, and evolution and geoscience exhibitions.

Bunjilaka is the centre for Aboriginal cultural history at Melbourne Museum (one of the venues of Museum Victoria). It comprises several spaces: *First Peoples* (the social and cultural history gallery that is the main focus of this article), the *Milarrri* garden, and the *Birrarrung* gallery. Bunjilaka originally opened as part of the new Melbourne Museum building in 2000. Bunjilaka was redeveloped over three years, reopening in 2014. A very large team of curators, designers, producers, cultural collaborators, and other museum staff were involved in updating and renewing the centre. This team was led by Genevieve Grieves, lead curator for the redevelopment.

The sub-galleries, exhibitions, and the structure of the redevelopment itself were built around three guiding principles: connection, continuity and diversity.<sup>6</sup> The principal strategy used to create a community-driven co-curatorship was to create the Yulendj Knowledge Group, a group of elders and respected people drawn from many different communities and nations across Victoria and the South East. Every aspect of the gallery redevelopment was discussed and approved by the Yulendj group: conservation, marketing, education programs,

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999) 8.

<sup>5</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Genevieve Grieves, 'Developing Bunjilaka,' *ArtsHub* (16 Jan. 2015), <<http://visual.artshub.com.au/news-article/features/museums/genevieve-grieves/working-in-partnership-with-aboriginal-culture-246875>>.

and interpretive text. There was an emphasis on 'deep listening'<sup>7</sup> and knowledge exchange; in addition to the transformative experience for Museum staff and the development of new work practices, the Yulendj group learnt about museum processes.<sup>8</sup> The exhibition was built on an Indigenous framework of country, people and culture; language is an essential part of this framework. Members of the Yulendj group connected with each object through picking it up, looking at it, or telling stories about it, for both cultural safety—to ensure that the Museum would not be displaying things that were forbidden or restricted—and deeper interpretation, allowing for more detailed, accurate or connected information to be attached to those objects. Objects were also taken back onto country to communities of origin. As a result of the Yulendj group's involvement with the material, Museum Victoria received additional information about the collection that had not previously been known.

But what prompted the redevelopment of Bunjilaka? Aside from the fact that all of the Museum's galleries were being progressively renewed and updated, the previous incarnation of Bunjilaka was considered by both members of Indigenous communities and those outside those communities to be too 'dark' and too self-reflective of museum practice.<sup>9</sup> For example, the exhibition *Two Laws* (2002–2012) contrasted the cultures, lives and experiences of Irrapmewe (an Arrente elder from Central Australia) and Sir Baldwin Spencer (an anthropologist working in the area and the Museum's first director). This placed the Museum's activities and its former director firmly in the spotlight in order to highlight and critique former practices and contrast them with the contemporary inclusivity and celebration of survival. Observations from Museum staff were that there was also not enough for children to do or to engage with in the space, and no clear path or journey for visitors to take.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, when the space was redeveloped, community consultation gave a framework for thematic, sensory, and emotional structures. The test audiences and co-creators of the gallery were very clear: they did not want the space to have an authoritarian, scientific 'museal' voice; rather, it was to be a strongly Aboriginal voice. They wanted the gallery to tell the hard and difficult stories, and for there to be more about Country, a connection with land, and local stories. For difficult stories such as the Stolen Generations content, curator Amanda Reynolds and other Museum Victoria staff set up listening circles including the Yulendj group and other community groups to collect and represent as broad a perspective as possible.<sup>11</sup>

This redevelopment process is a distinct departure from any suggestion of a 'natural history' approach to Indigenous culture, and is also an attempt to reclaim this space from a strictly anthropological or analytical voice. It was to be one holistic exhibition, with many possible experiences, and a diversity that reflected the multiplicity of Australian indigeneity. Content,

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<sup>7</sup> 'Deep listening' is a concept of listening holistically to find meaning beyond the words said. This idea is present in multiple Aboriginal groups, but is explained by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann in 'Dadirri—a Reflection,' *Compass Theology Review* 22 (1988): 9–11. Bunjilaka also includes a multimedia gallery experience called 'Deep Listening' which permits the visitor to listen to Aboriginal people speak about their own lives, culture and experiences.

<sup>8</sup> Grieves, 'Developing Bunjilaka'.

<sup>9</sup> These were reflections gathered through a process of community consultation undertaken prior to the redevelopment. See Grieves, 'Developing Bunjilaka'.

<sup>10</sup> Genevieve Grieves, personal communication, 27 Nov. 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Reynolds runs an independent curatorial business, Stella Stories. She was contracted as Senior Curator to work with the Bunjilaka team and Melbourne Museum staff to develop the 'Our Story' gallery in the *First Peoples* exhibition.

both material and intangible, was curated to represent specific localities, directly challenging the idea of homogenous Aboriginality.

### **Redevelopment: Voice and Sound**

The sonic content of the Bunjilaka galleries serves to reinforce this message. New technologies, in which the sound and music content of the exhibition feature strongly, assist with the representation of Indigenous culture. Digital labels allow for various perspectives and multiple voices; where stories or land were shared or contested, both interest groups were consulted and represented in the interpretive content. In the Wominjeka (Welcome) space, a large, stylised 3D map of South East Australia features metal poles at a level that invites exploration, and that activate when touched. These interactive 'language poles' perform an important function, ensuring that the first thing that people can hear when they enter the gallery space is language group names in the voices of members of those groups.

However, to reduce confusion, and to present a clear message as visitors are guided through the space, the curators created a combined, collective community voice, approved by the Yulendj group. This 'voice' is represented by The Messenger, an Aboriginal man of unspecified group, painted in the fashion of one who knew many languages, travelling between language groups and clans to carry messages and diplomatic negotiations. The image of this messenger moves between large touch screens, guiding the visitor groups through the gallery and introducing each section of content.

Another facet of this unified multivocality can be found in one of the most highly-acclaimed installations within *First Peoples*: the award-winning Creation Cinema. The Creation Cinema/Bunjil's Wings is a kinetic sculpture, involving physical and projected art, movement, music, sound effects, and spoken word performance. It is contained within a giant nest, and is intended to be one of the first experiences a visitor has in the gallery, after Wominjeka. It communicates the Kulin nation's creation story, introducing Bunjil the creator (eagle) and Waa the protector (crow). The composer/designer incorporated a variety of innovative sound sources into the musical track, including sounds recorded from space in the section on Aboriginal cosmology.<sup>12</sup>

The resulting presentation is a consciously curated way of taking a multiplicity of identities and constructing, for the purposes of the gallery, a unified affiliation of beliefs, practices, songs and voices. It is a cultural construction, but a deliberate, museological one—a version of Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's 'metacultural production'.<sup>13</sup> This does not make it a non-Aboriginal cultural facsimile, but a way of both representing and performing culture—a way of engaging with culture, and representing it in a way that is easier to recognise and understand for non-Aboriginal audiences.

*First Peoples* is divided into four main experiences or sub-galleries: Wominjeka; Our Story (a history of pre- and post-contact periods in South East Australia); Many Nations (a dense presentation of material culture artefacts from across Australia, including toys, tools, weapons, and instruments); and Generations (images and footage of Victorian Aboriginal people speaking of themselves and their cultural and community connections).

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<sup>12</sup> This installation was produced by an external contractor, ENESS.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,' *Museum International* 56.1–2 (2004): 52–65.

There are sonic and musical experiences in all of these galleries, from immersive audiovisual kinetic sculpture in Bunjil's Nest, to interactive toy clapping sticks and drums tethered to a plinth in Many Nations, and a song from Kutcha Edwards in Generations. There is good reason for this: music and songs are often repositories for language and vocabulary that would otherwise be lost. Additionally, for many Aboriginal communities, literacy levels are low.<sup>14</sup> To privilege written interpretation exclusively over that which can be heard would be to cut off a significant portion of the user group from their cultural material. For the purposes of this article, and an investigation of the way in which music interacts with and can occupy the same space as material culture, I will concentrate on the ways in which music is used in *First Peoples—Our Story*.

### The Production of Museum Music as Cultural Practice

The gallery's emphasis on continuity and continuous, living culture is aptly illustrated by the *mirnong* ('yam daisy', *Microseris lanceolata*) song and display. *Mirnong* (or *murrnong*—multiple spellings are given legitimacy) was an important food plant for Kulin nation people, harvested at a particular time of year, with the harvest signs and timing marked and passed on through song. For Bunjilaka, this story was reconstructed from women's knowledge, gathered through community consultation groups and the Yulendj group. Kulin nation women knew that songs were sung for this story and harvest, but the songs had not survived to the present day. The curatorial team commissioned a song (composed by Wurundjeri-willam<sup>15</sup> woman and artist Mandy Nicholson and sung by Nicholson and her daughter Ky-ya Ward) which is broadcast in the space by the *mirnong* story and objects. This harvest practice is placed pre-contact, but the act of creation and remembering in the community has supported the revitalisation of culture: as Amanda Reynolds mentioned in her presentation at the Museums Australia conference in 2015, Kulin nation women have begun harvesting *mirnong* again.<sup>16</sup>

The revitalisation brought about by the process of composing the song for the gallery challenges the idea of museums as purveyors of preservationist metacultural production:<sup>17</sup> the *mirnong* song was indeed new, composed for a display as part of a representation of culture and memory of past practice for which evidence remained in physical objects, sketches taken by white settlers, and oral histories. But by revitalising and restarting the harvest itself, it transcends a representation of culture; it becomes part of the network of cultural knowledge. The song was composed for the museum and commissioned by the museum, but it has gone beyond a historical re-enactment of culture and has become Aboriginal culture in action, with the museum as an agent and location for the cultural practice.

The *mirnong* display is a multifaceted, multipurpose example of music in a museum space, enhancing and interacting with the other objects on display. The visitor must interact with the display to hear the music: there is a material interaction with a button to push and words to read. It is music especially composed for the museum space, providing new and innovative

<sup>14</sup> *Closing the Gap 2015*, Australian Federal Government, 15 Nov. 2015, <[https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Closing\\_the\\_Gap\\_2015\\_Report.pdf](https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Closing_the_Gap_2015_Report.pdf)>.

<sup>15</sup> The Wurundjeri (Woi Wurrung language) is one of five language groups that form the Kulin Nation confederacy. The others are Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Taungurong, and Wathaurong.

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Reynolds, 'Exhibition Masterclass,' Museums Australia National Conference, Sydney Town Hall, Sydney, 23 May 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Intangible Heritage,' 52–65.

content for a practice that had all but ceased, and has functioned within the community to renew the cultural practices associated with the song.

The display itself is constructed of several glass object cases with associated interpretive panels, and an enlargement of a historical painting behind the cases, providing visual cohesion and boundaries to the display. Each case holds an object related to the gathering of *mirnong* yams. The first case holds a digging stick mounted in traditionally sparse museum fashion—a plain yellow backdrop, a single interpretive text panel. The other cases become more detailed or diorama-like, with a display case featuring a small cube of earth with a single *mirnong* plant and its single yellow blossom, a woven collecting basket hung over a bark platter holding some of the yam roots, and, in a challenge to a conservationist approach that places the static preservation of the object above all, three digging sticks with their ends apparently embedded in a plot of earth, gesturing at the way they may have been used. This contrast serves to highlight, in a small way, the difference between a traditionally anthropological approach to the curation of Indigenous cultural artefacts and the new-new-museology of the Bunjilaka collaborative curation.

The presentation of the song itself (see Fig. 1) is in a central panel, between the three digging sticks in earth and the planted *mirnong*. Entitled ‘Twaga Wuleli Bulok’ (Come Back Many Yams), the panel features photographs of composer Mandy Nicholson and her daughter and co-performer Ky-ya Ward.

**Figure 1.** ‘Twaga Wuleli Bulok’ (*mirnong* song). Woi wurrung lyrics and English translations.

*Wiñdha wuleli*  
*Badjurr murnmurdik pundarroneit-ngañinu wuleli*  
*Bilang-bilang-dui wilam-dui*  
*Wunga booboop narrkwarren-ngañinu*  
*Pundarroneit-njan pundarroneit-ngañinu*  
*Nyirrebruin dagung*  
*Yinga-ngañinu, twaga-ngañinu wuleli-bulok*

Where are the yam tubers  
 The women and daughters all dig yam tuber  
 They put them in their dilly bag and take them back to camp  
 They give them to their family  
 I dig, we all dig  
 Not hungry  
 We all sing, come back all of our many yam tubers

At the bottom of the panel there is a silver button and an invitation: ‘Push button to hear the *murnong* song sung in the Woi wurrung language.’ The performance of the song is structured as a call and response: Mandy sings a line, and Ky-ya repeats it, usually with the same melody, but sometimes with a lower-pitched phrase. They complete the song by singing it in unison. This structure serves to highlight the song’s intent to teach and pass on knowledge. The song is never heard in isolation; in addition to the sounds of other visitors in the space, there is a constant soundscape of bird and insect song, wind, and rhythmic percussion from other displays or locations.

It is significant to note that the display does not give a verbal description of the process of the seeking, digging, and gathering of the yams, nor is there any multimedia display to demonstrate this. Rather, this information is conveyed through multilayered stories (heard in the voices of women from communities who collected this plant), the historic imagery behind the cases, and through the song. The overall effect communicates a sense of deep knowledge about a small facet of Indigenous life that hints at a vaster interconnected network of understanding.

The incorporation of the earth, bark, and song serves to reinforce the message of the text: that the act of gathering these yams is part of an interdependent matrix of cultural knowledge and activity. This includes the teaching and passing on of cultural information to daughters; the digging, carrying, and preparation; the fire used to send messages, prepare food, and clear land; the knowledge of seasonal and harvest times through observation; and creation story. To isolate one act or story or piece of knowledge is to erase essential information about that item, and to misrepresent the whole.

The fact that the original song or songs of the *mirnong* harvest have been lost and a new work was commissioned for the museum space might raise concerns in some quarters about the 'authenticity' of the song, and therefore about the knowledge contained in the other stories or interpretive texts in the space. After all, museums have been cast as the repository for old things, things that have accreted significance by virtue of uninterrupted provenance and survival. Where innovative or contemporary cultural artefacts are collected, they are generally those that have been manufactured and used outside of the Museum—a space where 'real' things are collected, interpreted, and displayed, but rarely created.

Other instances of Indigenous cultural production and protection in Australia reveal a history of conflict. A fine example can be found in the 1980s debate between Aboriginal people of North-West Western Australia who repainted *wandjina* rock art, and those who saw such repainting as destructive.<sup>18</sup> For the Mowanjum people in this example, the act of repainting was a vital method of maintaining both the cultural values and meaning of the paintings, and also an essential part of their custodial responsibilities to country. These requirements were rejected by those with a more preservationist, Western model of heritage, who saw repainting with new materials and designs that obscured earlier work as a threat to the cultural values and materiality of the paintings.

### **Tangible and Intangible Culture—Where Music and Object Meet**

I choose to engage with the idea of intangible cultural heritage in this article because of the fraught relationship that indigenous and marginalised cultures have with what Smith calls Authorised Heritage Discourse, and also, historically, with museums and ethnography.<sup>19</sup> In this context, a case study of an exhibition of Aboriginal culture within a long-established Western-style museum is an ideal locus for discussion of (in/tangible) Indigenous culture and music within museums.

New museology has engendered a great deal of academic and practical discussion around the role of the museum object and there are several ways of thinking about materiality and

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<sup>18</sup> David Mowaljarlai, Patricia Vinnicombe, Graeme K. Ward and Christopher Chippindale, 'Repainting of Images on Rock in Australia and the Maintenance of Aboriginal Culture,' *Antiquity* 62.237 (1988): 690–96.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 4.



immateriality in museums.<sup>20</sup> One, as discussed by writers such as Laurajane Smith, is that objects themselves are meaning-free, and that all culture is, in a sense, intangible;<sup>21</sup> the cultural values, memories, experiences, and emotions that create meaning for societies and individuals are not inherent to the objects' physicality at all. Smith highlights the way in which museums and heritage organisations have traditionally privileged the object over the object's context, thus erasing or damaging the actual cultural artefacts' use, value, and meaning.

Another material cultural studies interpretation of the role of the object within a museum is that material culture is the aspect of culture created by people as they engage with their worlds—that objects are embodiments of culture and meaning, with their histories of manufacture, use, and significance. The object, therefore, does not contain inherent meaning, but is a catalyst for it. As Morgan notes:

To be sure, some objects seem to function only as denotations of codes. Like traffic signs: once you know the code, the signifier is devoid of interest. The sign tells you to stop or go, nothing more. But most things aren't so ancillary to meaning-making. They enter into it much more integrally, messily. Most objects acquire their significance through engagement with people and an object-user's interaction with other people and objects.<sup>22</sup>

These methods for dealing with materiality within museum spaces have something to add to the analysis of music as intangible heritage.<sup>23</sup> A possible extension of this discussion includes consideration of different ways in which music can assume an object-like role within a museum, and the ramifications these may have for the communities of origin.

Smith's method functions as a warning about cultural freezing: treating music like an object may cause a particular interpretation of culture to fossilise within a specific physical presentation of the music (the recording, the written lyrics, the space it is allowed within the gallery, the type of experience granted to the visitor).<sup>24</sup>

Morgan's analysis of the museum object allows music to occupy an object-like space within a museum, on the grounds that it is a creation of people that occurs as part of world-building and meaning-making. In the same way that the physicality of an object is not its meaning, but rather its meaning lies in the history and memory of manufacture, use, and interactions with other people and objects, so too does the sound of music have no inherent meaning, but the

<sup>20</sup> For examples of this in the literature, see Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Sandra Dudley, ed., *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> David Morgan, 'The Materiality of Cultural Construction,' *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, ed. Sandra Dudley (London: Routledge, 2012) 101.

<sup>23</sup> The complexities of music as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) are well documented in ethnomusicological literature, with prominent ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger having acted as a consultant and committee member for the UNESCO ICH convention development programs. See Anthony Seeger, 'Summary Report on the Regional Seminars,' *Safeguarding Traditional Cultures: A Global Assessment*, ed. Peter Seitel (Washington DC: Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, 2001), <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001323/132327m.pdf>>. In the field of applied ethnomusicology, this work has been built on and reframed from a preservationist approach to one of sustainability through change by Catherine Grant and her work with musical sustainability and endangerment. See Catherine Grant, *Music Endangerment: How Language Preservation Can Help* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> This is also covered within the ethnomusicological literature. Whilst I refer here to music taking on an 'object-like' presence in museum spaces, Christopher Small reminds us that music is not an object proper, but rather a focus for activity and practice. See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998) 8.

value of it is in the circumstances and process of composition, the performance, the recording and the interaction with listeners and their contexts.

These understandings of objects in the museum are examples of different points along a spectrum of museological thought. They are not mutually exclusive, and both the warnings and analytical frameworks they impart have something to offer the curator or exhibition designer who wishes to use music in their gallery. Considering the *mirnong* song as something object-like in Bunjilaka gives us the capacity to analyse the display as part of a coherent whole, and interrogate curatorial intent with a framework that is more familiar within the museum sector: material culture.

The new *mirnong* song is not an object in that it is not like a plaster cast of another, 'realer' object, nor is it an attempt at a reproduction of an earlier, lost version of a Thing. Rather, it is a new creation, the 'realness' of which lies in its connections to known practices and a network of knowledge. This realness is evidenced by the fact that the group of women with ancestral connections to the relevant country and to the composers and performers have once again started harvesting *mirnong*—this practice is not innovative, but has been reclaimed through the replacement of a lost and essential artefact of the process.

Ultimately, whilst the song can function within the display as an object-like presence, it is not a physical object, and examples from elsewhere in *First Peoples* demonstrate that music can be differentiated from material culture and other intangible cultural artefacts, and can bring additional interpretive and experiential value to a museum exhibition.

### Music and the Materiality of Installation

In UNESCO's definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage, music is listed as a chief exemplar as both a performing art and as a possible aspect of several other heritage practices.<sup>25</sup> Whilst music has material accoutrements—instruments, written scores or transcriptions, recording materials, programmes, performer costumes—it has no physical presence. The uniqueness of any given performance lies in that which is more difficult to capture in physical form: interpretation, cultural values and performance context.

In Bunjilaka, however, several of the installations allow the audience to interact with music as a quasi-material object, requiring the attention of eyes and hands to produce the sound, or a positive action to interact with a listening device. Listening devices such as headphones tether the visitor to the installation itself, producing an individual and focused experience of the music, until the visitor makes a definite decision to finish listening to it, take the headphones off, and walk away. This is in contrast to background or soundtrack music, which requires no specific attention or action on the part of the visitor, and has little or no object-like presence within the space. As stated previously, music (as intangible heritage) embodies values that are peculiar to its immateriality—it is not an object and its presence is unlike that of objects. However, by embodying it and allowing audiences to touch it, look at it, and listen to it by performing voluntary physical actions, the music attains an object-like status, through the activation of installation.

Does this create an experience of music that is peculiar to the museum? The materiality of music in a museum space is unique—one does not, in general, consume or engage with music

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<sup>25</sup> *What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?*, UNESCO, 8 Feb. 2016 <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>>.

through a single button press whilst standing up, consciously absorbing a small amount of content only to wander away to immediately view or listen to something else. In daily life, one is not tethered to a plinth holding an old-fashioned phone receiver to one's ear to listen to one song on repeat. The museal experience of music differs from 'normal' musical consumption as much as listening to an album on earphones on public transport differs from attending a live performance at a concert hall. These installations create a way to interact with music that is unique to the space.

'Coming Together' is an installation within *First Peoples* that features music as a majority portion of the material on display, and stands as another example of music being presented in a way that is object-like. This includes the incorporation of a nostalgic container for the music with which the visitor interacts. The Memory Jukebox has the appearance of a vintage jukebox, and features six iconic songs of contemporary Australian Aboriginal music. It requires some more conscious interaction than the *mirnong* display, in that the seven tracks must be selected or stopped using a series of buttons on the front of the jukebox.

The Memory Jukebox also engages the eyes: set into the area where the record player/changer would be in an original jukebox is a video screen that displays track information, as well as video and photographic content featuring the performers. When no song is selected or nobody is engaging with the display, the elder, singer/songwriter and activist Peter Rotumah appears as the face of the display, smiling, gesturing, and encouraging the visitor to come and interact with the jukebox.

In the introductory track, Rotumah explains the importance of community events and connections, describing the ways that modern community events like NAIDOC week, Survival Day, and sporting activities have replaced pre-contact ceremonies such as the Kulin nation's *tanderrum*, initiations, and trade meetings:

The spirit of coming together today is not just about the activities involved, it's not just about promoting awareness of Aboriginal cultural values, but for an Aboriginal person, it's about maintaining a connection that has been in your bloodline for forty thousand-plus years.

Thus Rotumah explains that community events, much like the *First Peoples* exhibition, are not just about performing Aboriginality for others but about maintaining a true connection with the culture itself. He then explains:

These songs on this jukebox are iconic songs for Aboriginal people. They are songs that move Aboriginal people, and tell a history, and tell a story about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal life as it is today, and as it always will be.

Finally, Rotumah goes on to encourage the listener/viewer to do some reflexive thinking as they enjoy the music:

And finally, while you're here listening to all this music, this deadly music, right, have a think about your journey so far, and what it means to you. What you thought before you come into this space, and what you are thinking now that you are leaving this space. Has it changed for you? In some way, I hope it has. And I hope it's changed in a very, very positive way.

Rotumah offers here a plainly communicated intent to change visitors' attitudes, which is reflected in the political messages communicated by the available tracks:

‘Yorta Yorta Man,’ Jimmy Little  
 ‘The Streets of Old Fitzroy,’ Harry Williams and the Country Outcasts  
 ‘Koorie Woman,’ Tiddas  
 ‘Black Boy,’ Coloured Stone  
 ‘Family Love,’ Yung Warriors  
 ‘Yil lul,’ Joe Geia

These songs, which are anthems within the local canon of Aboriginal contemporary music, reflect a range of Aboriginal experience: isolation, conflict and discrimination, gratitude and love for family, and a longing for country.<sup>26</sup> They act as cultural ambassadors and aesthetic exemplars for those unfamiliar with the music of Aboriginal Australia, and as loci for nostalgia and connection for those within the Indigenous community. They also reflect a broader theme, that of social activism, identity, and protest: the oldest song on the jukebox, Harry Williams’ ‘The Streets of Old Fitzroy’ makes explicit reference to the deleterious effects of ‘government ways’ and ‘white man’s ways.’ The Coloured Stone classic ‘Black Boy’ tells listeners, ‘Black boy, black boy, the colour of your skin is your pride and joy.’

### Negotiating Difficult Stories—Music, Affect, and Witcomb’s ‘Pedagogy of Feeling’

In the same way that the Memory Jukebox encourages the visitor to engage with Aboriginal stories in a way that goes beyond a Western, chronological understanding of history and into a direct engagement with social activism, *First Peoples*’ musical content also encompasses the experience and sharing of grief. The ways in which *First Peoples* uses multisensory modalities to navigate difficult shared histories and communicate emotional significance has not gone unnoticed by museum theorists. In a 2014 article, Andrea Witcomb uses *First Peoples* to illustrate what she calls a ‘pedagogy of feeling,’ which she defines as a museal activation that ‘bring[s] together people’s embodied responses to sensorial stimuli with an almost imperceptible processing of their cultural repertoire.’<sup>27</sup> This description of what is happening in *First Peoples* is particularly pertinent as the visitor walks through the *meen warann* (‘chopped root’, or smallpox) display—a story of disease, loss, and grief. As Witcomb states, a pedagogy of feeling comes into play where an installation or display is ‘designed to support revisionist agendas, and [does] so by working on the affective dimensions of an exhibition so as to provoke an affective response on the part of visitors.’<sup>28</sup>

The *meen warann* display is located in ‘Early Encounters’, which documents the immediate period around first contact between Kulin nation people and the white settlers. The display uses the impact of smallpox to illustrate the loss of life and culture experienced by Indigenous Australians after European arrival. This story is told through an exploration of grief and mourning rituals practised by the men and women of the Kulin nation, including the creation and wearing of clay caps, keeping of vigils, bloodletting, and wailing and singing. This is an immersive walking experience, beginning with an introduction from The Messenger, and leading the visitor through an avenue composed of a darkened corridor lined with tree shapes,

<sup>26</sup> For an introduction to this canon, see the discography in Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004) 263–8.

<sup>27</sup> Andrea Witcomb, “‘Look, Listen and Feel’: The First Peoples Exhibition at the Bunjilaka Gallery, Melbourne Museum,” *THEMA. La Revue des musées de la civilisation* 1 (2014): 59.

<sup>28</sup> Witcomb, “Look, Listen and Feel,” 59.

through which can be glimpsed solemn figures with painted faces. An array of *kopi* caps in stark white clay lie on the red earth floor, reminiscent of skulls, and the only other colours are black, dark red, and grey. A chorus of women's voices sings a song (see Fig. 2) that is broadcast overhead in the avenue, on a loop, requiring no interaction from the visitor to trigger it. There is no physical interaction afforded the visitor other than moving through the space, and the visitor must walk through the corridor or backtrack to the beginning of the gallery to access the content beyond.

**Figure 2:** 'Chuul'yuu Will'yuu' (The Porcupine) (the *meen warann* song). Djab Wurrung lyrics and English translations, from exhibition text panel.

**Chuul'yuu Will'yuu**

*Chuul'yuu Will'yuu*

*Wallaa gnorae.*

*Chillae binnae aa gna*

*Kinuuaa gnuuraa jeeaa,*

*Chiaebaa gnuutaa.*

*Kirraegirrae, kirraegirrae, kirraegirrae,*

*Leeaa gnaa.*

**The Porcupine**

Porcupine spikes

Burn like heat of fire.

Someone pinching me

When I am up high,

With affection like a sister.

Grinning, grinning, grinning,

Teeth mine.

The song in this part of the gallery is, unlike the *mirnong* song, not new. The interpretive text states that the song was first published by Scottish pastoralist James Dawson in 1880, that it originated one hundred years earlier in the Eora languages of Sydney, and that it had been traded South to and translated by the Kulin nation. Thus it is a relic of the very earliest days of contact.

The recording is performed by Vicki Couzens, Keerray Woorroong, and Justice Nelson (Jaara), 'in honour and in memory.' This is not just a recording made for aesthetic or pedagogical purposes, but is described as 'song and mourning': a direct act of remembrance on the part of the performers involved.

*Meen warann* is a multisensory and musical way of negotiating and communicating a small facet of a violent and oppressive history of occupation. It avoids explicit violence, direct confrontation, or any direct placement of culpability on the part of the visitor.<sup>29</sup> However, the visitor must take pains to avoid the walk—he or she cannot, given normal sight or hearing, pass through the display's corridor and not absorb the message of mourning and loss. Whilst the display and song refer specifically to smallpox, it gestures at a larger shared history of conflict and damage.

Susan McClary has said, 'music is not the universal language it has sometimes been cracked up to be: it changes over time, and it differs with respect to geographical locale.'<sup>30</sup> This idea is particularly germane to the museum experience, where practitioners are attempting to communicate across temporal or geographical divides. It would be a mistake for museum practitioners not to recognise that music will be interpreted in ways that are highly variable and dependent on the cultural context of the listener. However, as mentioned

<sup>29</sup> Also noted by Andrea Witcomb in "Look, Listen and Feel," 57, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 25.

in my introduction, I argue that it has a capacity within museum spaces to assist with the communication of emotional or affective content in a way that does not depend upon perfect cultural or linguistic understanding. McClary also touches upon this capacity when she says that music has an ‘uncanny ability to make us experience our bodies in accordance with its gestures and rhythms.’<sup>31</sup> It is the embodiment of emotional experience that may hold the key to unlocking this effect, evident in the *meen warann* display. In here, the music with its falling, slow, keening phrases, music which is patterned after a common (if not universal) physical experience of grief, invites the visitor into an empathetic affective experience. Another example of keening musical embodiments of grief can be found in the work of Steven Feld and his analysis of the ‘sung-texted weeping’ of the Kaluli (Bosavi) people of Papua New Guinea.<sup>32</sup> Feld notes that whilst the forms are diverse, human lament songs are reported across the world. Demonstrating this connection with the embodied experience of emotion, Feld reports five terms to describe the types of Kaluli weeping ‘songs’, words which ‘are all prefixed specifications of the same onomatopoeic verb for “cry” or “weep”’. He also describes how the various forms of ritualised mourning calls and their melodic contours are informed by local bird calls or different types of human cry, and the ways in which these human sonic expressions are refined and combined into polyphonic song, the performance of which can move the audience to empathetic tears.

Extending the principle identified by Feld, the music of *meen warann* communicates a deep grief that does not rely on the listener understanding the words or reading the interpretive text at the end, but rather echoes the repeated falling phrases of human sobbing. Here music, with its capacity to communicate emotional weight without perfect cross-cultural or linguistic understanding, provides the museum with a way to negotiate difficult content by engendering empathy in the listener.

Both the Memory Jukebox display with its unambiguous call for empathy and reflection, and *meen warann*, a display intended to document the catastrophic effect of invasion upon Aboriginal people, have a strong theme of encouraging social change. Museums have, generally, given up any pretence of political neutrality or objectivity. Indeed, many museums do not stop at an internal reflexivity around institutional biases, but are consciously setting out to enact social change as part of their organisational responsibilities.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

I have attempted to illustrate in this article some of the capacities of music in a museum space, and ways in which it has been deployed in a very recent exhibition. Music also comes with risks—to both visitor and particularly communities of origin—requiring that the post-colonial museum sector navigate the representation of culture in a way that acknowledges it as a dynamic, living thing. Risks to performers and communities of origin might include cultural misinterpretations or loss through misuse or inappropriate contextualisation of musics, or the loss of cultural and intellectual properties. Risks to visitors unfamiliar with the cultural material

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<sup>31</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Steven Feld, ‘Wept Thoughts: The Voicing of Kaluli Memories,’ *Oral Tradition* 5.2–3 (1990): 241–66.

<sup>33</sup> See Kylie Message, *Museums and Social Activism: Engaged Protest* (London/New York: Routledge, 2014); Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

include misunderstanding or being alienated from the material at hand due to poorly selected or presented musics. Bunjilaka demonstrates ways in which music can provide a space for the production of cross-cultural communication. It also stands as an example of a substantial attempt at deliberate advocacy and communication of emotional content through music.

Bunjilaka does offer a rich example of how music contributes to the communication and enhancement of museum content. The design and content of the new Bunjilaka galleries, and the use of music throughout, challenge in small ways the traditional Western and museological preference for eye over ear. Whilst a multisensory approach offers increased accessibility and scope for demonstrating new digital technologies, there is a sense that the sounds are less about showcasing the museum's modernity, and more about representing the sonic variety of Indigeneity, whether those be sonic landscapes of pre-contact or contemporary Indigenous contexts, or the different sounds of language, voice, rhythm, and song across the Kulin nation and beyond.

**About the Author**

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