



Australian
National
University

Repatriation Revisited

Indigenous heritage and gestures of return

Friday 5 October 2018, 9.15am – 4.00pm

Special Guests: Alfred Nayinggul, Connie Nayinggul, Benson Nagurrurrba, Victor Gumurdul, Yvonne Gumurdul, Donna Nadjamerrek, Pamela Ganambarr and Farrah Gumbula.

Keynote Speakers: Sally Treloyn and Tiriki Onus

Room 2.02, Sir Roland Wilson Building, ANU

Lunch and refreshments provided



Human remains from Arnhem Land are draped with Aboriginal flags prior to their repatriation from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Photograph Adis Hondo 2010.

This event is part of the international premiere of *Etched in Bone*, a documentary about the theft of human remains from the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve in 1948 and their repatriation sixty years later. Representatives from communities affected by the bone theft have generously agreed to be part of the program, which involves dialogue and reflection about the significance of repatriation and the difficulties it poses. This is timely, for in recent years Indigenous communities across Australia have faced the challenge of devising new rituals or invoking old ones when stolen ancestors are returned to their homelands. In acknowledging this history, the symposium will consider how a larger ethos of return is affecting contemporary cultures and setting the terms for scholarly collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Convenors: Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon.

All welcome, but for catering purposes please register your intention to come by 2 pm on 4 October. Email: etchedinbone.themovie@gmail.com.

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A School of History Symposium at the Australian National University

Room 2.02, Sir Roland Wilson Building, ANU

Friday 5 October, 9.15 am – 4 pm

Special thanks to our sponsors...

This event was made possible by the generous support of the Department of Communications and the Arts, Indigenous Repatriation Program; the National Museum of Australia; the ANU Australian Studies Institute; ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences Conference Fund; and the ANU Research School of Social Sciences.

9.15

Coffee and registration

9.30-9.40

Announcements, acknowledgments and welcome.

9.40-10.30

‘Stirring the Archive: Old and new media along the road to *Etched in Bone*’

Martin Thomas and Béatrice Bijon

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that the verb ‘to archive’ refers to the transfer of data to a store containing infrequently used files or their removal to a ‘lower level’ in the hierarchy of memories. The definition conjures up the dry image of somebody dragging a folder onto a hard drive, supposedly because of its low level of interest. In this presentation, we will challenge this idea by revisiting some formative moments in the *Etched in Bone* project. We will contrast the dictionary definition with the opening scene in the film where Bininj elder, Alfred Nayinggul, ritually strikes a computer hard drive with a smouldering branch. That hard drive contained the archive of digital files that would go into the film. Alfred’s purpose was to protect the audience from spirits who might be troubled by footage of their bones being disturbed. By looking seriously at this ritualistic treatment of a computer archive, we will explore how an enriched notion of archiving can open possibilities for cross-cultural understanding.

10.30-11.00

‘Staging a homecoming’

Connie Nayinggul, Benson Nagurrurrba, Alfred Nayinggul, Victor Gumurrdul, Yvonne Gumurrdul and Donna Nadjamerrek.

In this panel discussion, six speakers from Gunbalanya reflect on the previous session and on the events depicted in *Etched in Bone*. The panellists have been invited to revisit key events in the repatriation and to give a behind-the-scenes perspective. Two of the speakers have

travelled to Washington to collect bones of their ancestors. All were involved in the rituals that laid them to rest in their country.

11:00-11:20

Morning tea

11.20-12.20

‘Dancing spirits home: How *kun-borrk* returned ancestors to their country’

Reuben Brown

When ancestral bones from the US arrived in the community of Gunbalanya in 2011, they were reburied with dance-accompanied song, called *kun-borrk* in the language of Biniŋ people of the stone country. *Kun-borrk* accompanied each stage of the ceremony, from the procession that accompanied the bones in vehicles to the gravesite, to the interment and covering of the grave and the smoking in the aftermath of the burial. As the bones were interred, men and women lined up at the gravesite and danced the spirits home in the direction of their country.

In this presentation I will screen excerpts of the performance and discuss how the songmen who conducted the ceremony ordered and arranged their songs to ensure the safe passage of the spirits as they journeyed to their final resting place. I will also discuss the significance of a secondary repatriation that emerged as a result of the American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land: the return of recordings of *kun-borrk* made in 1948, and their ongoing relevance today. As collecting institutions around the world seek to re-engage source communities with their materials, this presentation addresses the questions: how do Indigenous communities come to terms with legacies of taking and collecting? What is the role of song, dance and language in the return of ancestral remains, and how are cultural materials in digital formats received, ritualised, and emotionally metabolised?

12.20-1.30

Lunch

1.30-2.15

‘Remembering Joe Gumbula: Singer and scholar’

Pamela Ganambarr, Farrah Gumbula and Aaron Corn

The late Joe Gumbula was a distinguished Yolŋu musician, ceremony man and scholar. As an ARC Indigenous Research Fellow at ANU, he made a vital contribution to intellectual life, especially through his connections in the museum world. As the senior member of the delegation that travelled to Washington in 2010 to bring home ancestors’ bones from the Smithsonian, Gumbula played an important role in *Etched in Bone*. In this session, Pamela Ganambarr and Farrah Gumbula talk to Joe’s long-term collaborator, Aaron Corn, about the man, his music and his relationship with the paperbark swamp Djiliwirri.

2.15-3.15

‘Troubling ground: Cultural heritage repatriation and resurgence in the northwest and southeast of Australia’

Sally Treloyn and Tiriki Onus

In 2011 the Australian and New Zealand Regional Committee of the International Council for Traditional Music stated that Australia's Aboriginal music and dance traditions are 'the oldest and most endangered in the world' and estimated that up to 98 per cent are no longer practised. Individuals and organisations in community have sought to address this situation by pursuing strategies for cultural continuation that have existed for thousands of generations. Reclamation and repatriation of archival sound recordings and other sorts of cultural record have increasingly entered the day-to-day lives of practitioner communities and those of allied researchers. There is ample evidence that the repatriation of these records contributes to maintaining the vitality of endangered artistic traditions and the linguistic, epistemological, and ontological diversities they sustain.

Repatriation also produces knowledge about the modern contexts in which cultural heritage is created, shared, learnt and performed. For those engaged in this sort of repatriation, finding, accessing and returning sounds and other knowledge to community can also bring to the surface time capsules of past intercultural traumas, removals, and loss. Upon this troubled ground, we attempt to collaborate and create. The act of repatriation allows us to face the deep paradoxes and double binds inherent to intercultural collaboration in a settler-state context. In this presentation, using case studies from the Kimberley and from the Kulin nations, we trouble the ground of repatriation and consider a range of processes, epistemological frameworks and cultural practices that render it more fertile.

3.15-3.45

“Stealing is no bloody good to everybody; we should leave stealing and live together, black and white”

Allan Marett

The title is a quote from Jacob Nayinggul as he prepared to bury repatriated bones on the outskirts of Gunbalanya in 2011. Allan Marett will reflect on this and other key themes of the film, as well as issues raised by other speakers in the symposium.

For those who want to continue...

Please come to the launch by Peter Yu of Laura Rademaker's book *Found in Translation: Many Meanings on a North Australian Mission* (Hawaii University Press). The launch will start at 4.30 in the foyer of the Hedley Bull Building, 130 Garran Road, ANU.

Notes on presenters

Session 1

Martin Thomas directed *Etched in Bone*. He has published eight books on history, art, anthropology and cross-cultural encounter including *The Many Worlds of R. H. Mathews*, winner of the National Biography Award. He teaches in the School of History at ANU where he is Deputy Head. **Béatrice Bijon** is co-director of *Etched in Bone*. She has published several books on female travel writing, postcolonial literatures and British women's suffrage. She teaches literature in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at ANU.

Session 2

Alfred Nayinggul is a traditional owner of country around the East Alligator River. He works in a community-run ranger program and is involved in numerous cultural projects around Gunbalanya. Alfred and his sister Connie are son and daughter of the late Jacob Nayinggul. **Connie Nayinggul** spends much of her time at the Nayinggul's outstation at Mikkinj where she cares for country. **Benson Nagurrurrba** is an artist, tour guide and board member of Injalak Arts and Crafts, the art centre at Gunbalanya. **Victor Gumurrdul** is one of the traditional owners of Gunbalanya. He works on a community-run cattle station. **Yvonne Gumurrdul** is a ranger and traditional owner. **Donna Nadjamerrek** is Indigenous Engagement Officer for the Australian Government in Gunbalanya. She is involved in numerous community organisations.

Session 3

Reuben Brown is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music. He became involved in the repatriation of human remains to Gunbalanya while doing fieldwork for his PhD thesis in performance studies, titled 'Following footsteps: the *kun-borrk/manyardi* song tradition and its role in western Arnhem Land society'.

Session 4

Pamela Ganambarr is a senior Yolngu woman who lives on Galiwin'ku (aka Elcho Island). She is the widow of the late Joe Gumbula. **Farrah Gumbula** is the daughter of Joe. She is presently based in Darwin where she works as a research assistant and interpreter. Ethnomusicologist **Aaron Corn** is Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) and the National Centre for Aboriginal Language and Music Studies at the University of Adelaide. He collaborated extensively with Joe Gumbula.

Session 5

Sally Treloyn is an ARC Future Fellow at the University of Melbourne and Co-Director of the Research Unit for Indigenous Arts and Cultures. She has conducted research on the public Junba dance-song tradition of the Kimberley since 1999 and over the last decade has been engaged in research centred around community-led revitalisation efforts that utilise repatriation. **Tiriki Onus** (of the Yorta Yorta and Djadjawurrung people) is a singer, artist and lecturer in Indigenous arts and cultures at the University of Melbourne. He is Co-Director of the Research Unit for Indigenous Arts and Cultures. His research centres on the resurgence of the *biganga* – the possum skin cloak – in southeastern Australia.

Session 6

Allan Marett is Emeritus Professor of Musicology at the University of Sydney. He has published widely on Australian Aboriginal music, in particular on the Wangga of northwest Australia. His book *Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts* won the Stanner Prize. He is also an authority on Sino-Japanese music history.