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Wild artefacts at two Australian museums

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Abstract

Indigenous communities and Australian state museums appear to have settled into a truce that might best be described by Hennessy et al.'s (2013) notion of a 'philosophy of repatriation'. This means that, after failed repatriation arguments, distance remains at the heart of the dynamic between descendant communities and their museum-stored artefacts. In the following paper, I present two stories of North Queensland Indigenous people who visited their rainforest artefacts in state museums. I conceptualise ancestralised objects as wild artefacts, where wild is invoked in two related senses. Primarily, artefacts are like wild Country: unvisited and unstable. Moreover, they are wild as in the Aboriginal English sense of wild: angry at an injustice and potentially dangerous. Artefacts might simply remain wild. Yet if North Queensland artefacts can be kept closer to Country, in regional museums for instance, this would assist the descendant community to achieve ameliorating contact and care.

KEYWORDS
ancestors, indigenous, regional museums, repatriation

1 | INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Museum storage is often thought of as the end of the road for artefacts. It can be the site at which complex relationships between descendant communities,[i] their ancestors, and museums begin (Kreps, 2020; Morphy, 2019; Peers & Brown, 2003). In the following discussion, where North

Queensland Indigenous people visit their rainforest artefacts in state museums, we will see that there were deeply varied reactions and opinions. This evidences the problematic notion of a single community response. What was generally evident, however, was a descendant community's complicated experience of their ancestralised artefacts' disconnection from country and kin.

An artefact is 'ancestralised' because it is linked to, and constituted from, country as well as the deceased ancestor who made it. Physical distance from country is therefore a problem for the ancestralised artefact. As I will argue, the distant artefact becomes 'wild'. In land claims work I have heard other Queensland Indigenous people call the country that is theirs, but not cared for or visited, 'wild Country', as in one traditional owner's description to me: 'that's wild Country. Even I don't go there'.[ii] Museum artefacts are wild in this sense, that is, *unvisited* and *unstable.* More tentatively, I suggest they are wild in the Aboriginal English meaning of a 'wild' person: someone who is *angry* at an injustice and potentially *dangerous*, in this case for being abandoned and forgotten on someone else's land. Such wild artefacts are in need of reassurance and calming care from their countrymen if they are to be less wild.

To politically contextualise the two museum visits in this paper, I first discuss current relations between Australian Indigenous descendant communities and museums against the backdrop of a wider repatriation discourse. The global push for Indigenous rights has extended to rights of access to artefact collections in most museums, and this has helped clear the path for arguments to be made around the repatriation of all artefacts back to Australia. These repatriation arguments, however, some of which I will outline here, have ultimately failed. For now then, we are left with what Hennessy et al. (2013) call a 'philosophy of repatriation'. While it initially appears to me that this 'philosophy' exists paradoxically in lieu of 'reality' (e.g. in the concept of 'digital return' that the above authors discuss), we can at least concede that a philosophy of repatriation is an improvement in the often-fraught relations between museums and Indigenous Peoples. The rest of this paper describes another example of this philosophy—in the experiences of people of the Murray Upper descendant community in North Queensland, Australia, who visited artefacts at two Australian museums. The group who visited the stores included Elders and young people from several different clans of the Dyirbal language group—including Girramay, Jirrbal, and Jiru—and were mostly artists affiliated with the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation based in Cardwell (hereafter, Girringun).

Authors from various disciplines have investigated the role of story and storying in research with Indigenous people (see for example Archibald et al., 2019; Phillips & Bunda 2018; Somerville et al., 2023). Sium & Ritskes (2013, ii) summarise that, 'Stories in Indigenous epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form'. Methodologically, this kind of valuing of stories has been beneficial for the current research. Moreover, as a Yawuru researcher from Western Australia, I often adopted the position of younger listener, which was appropriate and useful for cross-cultural engagement with Indigenous Elders from North Queensland. Two stories are featured. One is from a senior Girramay man, as he told it to me and a senior Jirrbal woman, in their community of Murray Upper. His story was about a visit with his nephew to an interstate museum 'down south', as the Elder described it. Another visit, which I participated in as a volunteer and researcher, occurred closer, at the regional Museum of Tropical Queensland (MTQ) in Townsville.

An argument for 'wild artefacts', made through Indigenous stories, could lead to a better position from which to generally advocate for repatriation. Yet, we should remember a key point which is sometimes disregarded in popular repatriation discourse: not all Australian Indigenous people are in favour of artefact repatriation back to their Country. During this research, I found at least one senior Murray Upper Elder who was highly familiar with what I called 'the burden

of keeping' (Innes, 2021, p. 66). This burden included his anticipation of potential politicisation of artefacts in the community when—post-repatriation—only *some* people (e.g. those with social connections, those with a key) might be able to access artefacts. To be clear on my position, and if I had to generally advocate anything, it would be for the continued importance of *regional museums* for descendent communities, particularly in light of the undeniable complexities of repatriation.

2 | THREE FAILED ARGUMENTS FOR REPATRIATION

> The word museum has a negative connotation signifying the place where dead things lie and native people don't go.
>
> (Cranmer-Webster in Clavir, 2002, p. 85)

Since the 1960s, theory around artefacts has disrupted the idea of them as merely objects, or dead things, which can then only be resuscitated as agents through the authoritative breath of the expert. The problem with this countering movement (apart from the fact that it remains within an elusive theoretical domain that is of no consequence to most people) is that a descendant community viewpoint here remains only one of many. Moreover, multiple viewpoints, though they may be acknowledged briefly via an exhibition, are less fully incorporated into the western museum system of operations. Archaeologists have done much to add to the 'more-than-scientific meanings' of artefacts (Brown, 2020, p. 256), yet as archaeologist Rodney Harrison (2013) summarises: 'postmodern restructuring … does not necessarily reform the system … does not lead to a real sharing of authority … only to reorganisation of existing categories to accommodate differing perspectives' (p. 6). To address their negative image with Indigenous communities around the world and remain relevant in the 21st century, state museums have had to embrace a 'sharing of authority'. This has meant confronting both points of critique made in the comment above by Cranmer-Webster, a Canadian First Nations curator, that is, not just that artefacts are 'dead things', but that native people do not often 'go there'. At this point, we appear to shift from the postmodern to the postcolonial.

The postcolonial challenge from Australian Indigenous people has resulted in what I consider to be a more straightforward proposition for museums than postcolonialism, and that is decolonising practice. Since the passing of *The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA) in 1990—a federal law in the US that made all state-funded museums report their Indigenous inventory lists to associated Native American communities—Indigenous people 'going there', for museums, has meant being transparent about what is in the stores and then engaging with communities to return human remains and ceremonial objects to communities. It has also meant actively supporting the physical presence of Indigenous people in traditionally colonial spaces to address the ironic critique of Moreton-Robinson (2015) that so-called postcolonial spaces are not really 'inhabited by Indigenous people' (p. 10). There is no federal legislation like NAGPRA in Australia, but the return of human remains is encouraged, for example, by the National Museum of Australia.[iii]

What is less usual is the return of secular objects. This is related, it seems to me, to three unsuccessful arguments typically made for returning secular objects. The first is that objects have been acquired by illegal means, in other words, by theft. This argument is supported by the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which Australia is a party to. It has been

suggested that, historically, it is likely human remains and sacred objects were more often stolen than secular objects because secular objects, by virtue of their lack of sacredness, were more easily acquired from Aboriginal people through 'purchase, trade or gifting' (Pickering, 2015, p. 429). One could go a step further and say that the repatriation of secular objects is uncommon, not because of their 'lack of sacredness' per se, but rather because of their 'lack of association with theft'. Such an assessment leaves aside Australia's history of colonial battles where artefacts may have been left behind during so-called 'dispersion' and *buliman* 'police' raids of camps, or as one Girramay Elder described it: 'run from the camp, kid on the shoulder, leave the artefacts behind' (Beeron, personal communication, 2016). In any case, the point I am making is that without written evidence of this purported camp-raid situation the same Western legal framework that protects property rights also supports the museum's right to keep what it deems to have legitimately acquired.

Just as ineffectual for the return of secular objects is a second potential argument for repatriation: that all artefacts should be returned to where they belong (just like ceremonial objects and human remains) because in fact every artefact is partially sacred through its material embodiment of ancestral beings and power. This extension of the powerful sacred to more secular objects has been suggested at times for Indigenous cultures across the globe. For example, it has been articulately described in a North American context:

> Sacredness in the Indian world is like the early morning dew, it falls over everything. Nothing is exempt, everything is sacred. But there are degrees of sacredness, places where the dew only lightly touched, and others where the dew heavily coated.
>
> (George Horse Capture in Rosoff, 2003, p. 74)

Pickering (2015) notes this potential for Australian Indigenous objects, stating that, 'all objects are, to some extent, a manifestation of the sacred being' (p. 431). The weight given to the category 'sacred' in museum practice is demonstrated in the National Museum of Australia's Indigenous artefacts classification system, which deals with degrees of sacredness and subsequent management of artefacts. Of the five categories,[iv] 'secret-sacred' requires the highest level of restricted access in museum storage (where Elders might still elect to keep sacred artefacts). Usually only initiated men are able to access secret-sacred artefacts, and cultural protocols are in place around the handling of such artefacts.

As Pickering further points out, however, elders have in some cases overturned artefacts previously categorised as secret-sacred, thus allowing previously secret pieces to come out for display. This demonstrates the importance of ongoing engagement with community representatives, but it also points to how the category 'sacred' may be expected to do too much in terms of a repatriation argument. Clearly not all artefacts, at all times, are sacred 'enough' to make this argument work. Of course, there are other ways for Australian Indigenous people to say that an artefact is significant without invoking the almost universally recognised category of 'sacred'. Before elaborating on this, I raise a third and final position from which an unsuccessful argument for repatriation of secular objects has been made.

Indigenous people have now seemingly found the globally endorsed support they need to argue from a position based on 'rights'. After an initial vote of no (together with other reluctant settler states such as Canada, the United States, and New Zealand), Australia finally agreed to be a signatory party to the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007*, which commits to the 'repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains' (article 12.2). It is easy to see how

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Indigenous rights advocacy in Australia echoes the language used in Australia's *Native Title* legislation, which is often described in legal discourse as 'a bundle of rights' for the determined claimants (such as the right to hunt on, or exclude other Indigenous groups from, traditional lands). A few, often younger, participants in my research expressed themselves through a discourse of rights. For example, when I spoke to one Girramay woman about artefacts that her grandfather had lately seen in a museum 'down south', her firm view as a politically engaged young person was that the museum should not have them—'they should be here', she stated. By 'here' she meant a climate-controlled keeping place located on her and her grandfather's Country and run by Girringun. But the legal ineffectiveness of a rights position is ultimately attested to in the fact that the southern museum's artefacts were not at Girringun and were not likely be returned there. Moreover, artefacts that were at the Girringun keeping place, at the time I was there, were only on loan from the Queensland Museum. This suggests a kind of momentary repatriation. In short, although *Native Title* offers some land-use rights, and the *UN Declaration* supports rights for the return of ceremonial objects and human remains, when it comes to legally defensible rights for repatriation of secular artefacts back to country in Australia—though we may insist these rights exist—there really are none for Indigenous Australians.

A rights discourse may in fact be unhelpfully reductive when trying to focus on emic ways of thinking. Certainly, it did not adequately describe the way that the Girramay grandfather felt when I spoke with him about a museum visit he had lately been on. His view was more similar to a finding of Krmpotich's (2010) study with Haida people from British Columbia in Canada and their efforts to locate and repatriate ancestor remains in museums. Krmpotich hypothesised that the Haida, given their history of political agitation for land rights and repatriation, would explain repatriation in terms of rights. However, she found that Haida emphasised obligation and belonging, over rights or ownership, through a specifically Haida way of expressing connection (namely, a Haida kinship principle of *yahgudang*, meaning to pay respect and be fit for respect). It was thus concluded that, 'explanations positing repatriation as a statement of cultural rights, or as a post-colonial or decolonizing act were insufficient' (Krmpotich, 2010, p. 159). This finding heeds a further warning that Krmpotich invokes: 'contemporary trends (such as post-colonialism or cultural rights) can efface other ways of knowing artefacts' (Seremetakis in Krmpotich, 2010, p. 174). My discussion proceeds against this backdrop of failed *theft*, *sacredness*, and *rights* arguments. It ends with 'other ways of knowing' artefacts.

3 | 'A PHILOSOPHY OF REPATRIATION' AND STRATEGIES FOR ACCESS

In lieu of actual repatriation, but in a context of compromise, Hennessy et al.'s (2013) notion of a 'philosophy of repatriation' is salient. The authors state: 'Under the impetus provided by NAGPRA and what we call the "philosophy of repatriation" (predicated on reciprocity and respect), the roles of relationships between museums and descendant communities have been transformed' (p. 47). Relationships based on reciprocity and respect have been encouraged, it seems to me, by the promotion of three basic things for Indigenous people of a descendant community, each of which ostensibly represents a gradual increase in Indigenous control:

1. Access to museum-stored artefacts;
2. Consultation regarding artefacts' care; and
3. Collaboration on representation in museum exhibits.

In the first story I retell below, *consultation* is at play though the museum's wish to speak with a senior Elder about the identification and care of Murray Upper artefacts. In the second story, *collaboration* is evident in the 2017 exhibition *Manggan*: *Gather, Gathers, Gathering* organised by Girringun and the MTQ. My primary focus here is on *access* to artefacts, which occurred in both examples—or, in other words, Indigenous people 'going there'.

In addition to physical visits to the artefacts, museums have employed other strategies aimed at increasing descendant community access to museums-stored artefacts. One example is the idea of 'digital return' that Hennessy et al. (2013) discuss. Another is outreach work, which I have heard described colloquially as the 'travelling suitcase' of artefacts method. An interesting example of this suitcase method in Australia comes from Hafner (2013) who travelled with artefacts housed at Museums Victoria to the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Hafner found that, unlike old photographs of people and Country, which elicited interest and excitement from Lamalama people, reactions to artefacts were unexpectedly ambiguous; some 'apparent emotional discomfort' (p. 362) was even discerned. Hafner interprets this as being the result of a problematic change of physical context—from museum to Country. She thus observes that: 'As a kin-based society ... re-introducing objects whose biographies were unknown, or only partially known in the case of the artefacts, posed challenges for the Lamalama in establishing an effective relationship with them' (p. 362).

I had never heard of museums bringing artefacts to Murray Upper in this way. However, in an example that could be described as a moment of digital return, I once took minutes for a community meeting held on Girramay Country, near Murray Upper, where a museum curator and other researchers presented to numerous members of the Murray Upper descendant community. A museum project was being proposed via a PowerPoint with various images of rainforest artefacts and plant materials. As with the Lamalama in Hafner's project, there seemed to be a similar feeling from people of wanting to somehow emplace the artefact images: familiar rainforest styles and shapes were recognised, language names were identified, and acquisition locations were enquired after. The presentation of artefact images to the group did not appear to cause the same level of discomfort described by Hafner for the Lamalama (and I wonder whether the Lamalama's discomfort was not partly due to being so close to material artefacts that might yet belong to another's Country), but I could see how there could be some expectation for connection and recognition, which might cause disappointment if not met.

Girringun people's later experience at the MTQ will soon be described, but at this point I can briefly compare the community meeting with the MTQ visit. During the PowerPoint presentation within the community, images of artefacts were selected by a museum curator due to presumed relevance and perhaps connection, but at the MTQ people could choose for themselves which artefacts to attend to on the museum shelves. Subsequently, expectations of connection with artefacts at the MTQ seemed lower, so that there was high excitement when a recognition or personal connection was made in a more spontaneous way. I would thus conclude that when compared to digital return and outreach programs, it is the physical visit into the museum stores that demonstrates the strongest commitment to decolonising practice for museums holding Indigenous collections. There is no (digital or travelling) substitute for a physical visit into the collection stores, or any compromise that could be called decolonising other than a descendant community actually 'going there', observing there, moving about in there, and selecting for themselves what artefacts to seek out. In short, while all strategies for repatriation should be encouraged, material and human access of this kind ought not be replaced or undervalued.

Fienup-Riordan's (2003) work with Yup'ik Elders from Alaska in the US provides one of the first in-depth case studies of an Indigenous-led visit into the museum. With members of Yup'ik,

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Fienup-Riordon attended Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum (at the time called Museum für Völkerkunde) and spent 3 days in the collections with over 7000 plus artefacts, the largest Yup'ik collection in the world. Fienup-Riordon, like Hennessy et al. (2013), came up with a term to describe what exists in lieu of full repatriation, calling it 'visual repatriation'. She summed up the endeavour by saying: 'what we sought was not so much the collection's physical return to Alaska, but the return of the knowledge and stories, the history and pride that they embodied and that, we hoped, we would be able to bring home' (p. 29). Most interestingly for the current discussion is how she describes the visit at one point as like attending a 'dance festival' because Yup'ik Elders were so animated in their remembrances of practices that artefacts evoked. Although 'access' or anything short of real repatriation—whether virtual, digital or visual—has been criticised (as mere 'data sharing', e.g. see Boast & Enote, 2013), these types of events or experiences, like dancing through the museum's collections or listening to the old people's songs, are worth a closer look as examples of a philosophy of repatriation at work.

Two visits to different museums that will now be described were indeed special events for Girringun people. The first event is a personal account from Girramay Elder, Claude Beeron. Claude visited a museum collection store in a city outside of Queensland, 'down south' as he called it, with his nephew, an artist. Sitting in his Country, Claude told this story to me and Girramay and Jirrbal woman Emily Murray, also a senior Elder from Murray Upper. The second story is about the Girringun community's visit to a closer, regional museum, the MTQ in Townsville. I was able to attend and be a part of this MTQ visit in 2017.

4 | CLAUDE BEERON IN A MUSEUM 'DOWN SOUTH'

A few months before Girringun's visit to the MTQ in Townsville, I was in Murray Upper, known as an origin or descendant community due to the many artefacts collected from there. I had just visited with Emily Murray, an Elder and artist, and as I was packing up to leave I told her I was going to see a married couple of her generation—Claude and Theresa Beeron—who also lived in Murray Upper. The pair had recently moved from their old place that I used to visit, and I had only been to the new place once before. I said to Emily that I hoped I remembered where their house was. Emily said, 'I'll come for ride. Get out of the house', her motive probably being to show me the way, and perhaps also to visit her two old friends. We hopped in the JCU car and drove the few minutes it took to get to Claude and Theresa's house. Theresa had been sick and was asleep inside, but Claude came out to greet Emily and me.

Like Emily, Claude is a senior Elder in Murray Upper. At the time he was the most authoritative spokesperson for Girramay people and a board member of the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation based in nearby Cardwell. Emily, Claude, and his wife Theresa are all part of the small group of aged people who still speak Dyirbal conversantly. I had occasionally heard the three of them together speaking in the everyday language style of Dyirbal called 'Guwal'. For this reason and others, they are all highly regarded in the Murray Upper community.

Despite assisting Professor Bob Dixon with a Dyirbal (2017) dictionary publication, I still could not understand much of the language, let alone speak it. But Claude knew about this work and would sometimes try to talk to me in his language, as he did on this day: 'Where is your home? What is your name?' he greeted me in Guwal Dyirbal. 'Ngaja Tahnee, Broomebarra,' I replied sheepishly, knowing that this was terribly poor Dyirbal. He laughed good-naturedly, saying only 'you need your Guwal name'. I remarked that his new place was lovely, and quieter than the old place on the busy road to Murray Falls. In fact he was house-sitting this 'new place'. It had a

verandah that overlooked fruit trees in the yard and the spectacular Cardwell mountain range, and we took up chairs here and started to chat about family and what everyone was up to. Claude told me that he had just visited a large Australian museum 'down south'[v] in another state, not long ago. 'Oh,' I said, 'What was that like?'

Claude told me that he and his nephew had been flown down to the museum. The nephew had been able to pick up an axe made by his grandfather, and Claude had remarked to him how special it was to hold in his hands the same axe his grandfather once held. As well as handling artefacts, Claude was to speak about these artefacts from the Murray Upper/Cardwell area to the contingent of people gathered, 'experts' he supposed. But he said he found it hard to do this, to speak, because upon looking at artefacts from his Country he was too overcome with emotion to do what he was sent to there to do—'his job' as he put it. A number of pieces were made by old people whom Claude had known personally, and referring to one of the deceased makers it was, as Claude described it, 'like he standing right there in front of you'. Claude said he had talked to them in Guwal, to the artefacts that were also his family. He told me he had said something like 'hello, I'm here'. And then—'I hope they are looking after you here, goodbye, I'm sorry I have to leave you here. I hope they look after you well'.

At this moment Emily, who was sitting quietly to the side, spoke. 'Well, he must have been happy you visited him anyway.' In his characteristic way Claude responded, 'ye-p, yep, yep'. Claude told us how he had come back to his hotel room that night after the museum visit and noticed a distinctive blue-coloured curtain on the high window: 'the same blue shirt that this fella would wear all the time. His favourite shirt'. Seeming to understand, Emily said, 'that must have been him. He was happy you came. That someone from his country came and saw him. He followed you back to that place'. Claude nodded and continued, 'Oh it was sad to leave that fella. I had to tell them curators, "make sure you look after him now. Be gentle with him. And don't drop him"'. Claude gave a small laugh at this, and Emily and I tentatively joined in. Claude's joke switched the mood for us all and also signalled the end of his story.

The recollection Claude gave, which was then added to by Emily, could confirm artefacts to be the theoretical 'subject' standing there in front of you. There was certainly the strong personification of artefacts: both Claude and Emily switched to referring to an artefact as 'him' and 'that fella' with no explanation, such was the natural association. One could infer that because the artefact was in this way living (or alternatively, dying) in storage, so the notion of material objects having 'biography' (Kopytoff, 1986) would seem to apply to an Indigenous viewpoint. We might track the artefact's life all the way back to its acquisition by the museum, focusing on location and movement, and perhaps even consider the museum to be a part of the artefact's ongoing 'itinerary' (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015). But such inferences, of biography for the thing or intinerary of the object, would not be sufficient given the artefact's strong link to a deceased family member, and the sense of its being stuck, or somehow tethered, to a place off-Country.

For Emily and Claude, their ancestor's spirit could roam out of its confines to follow you, but at some point it eventually had to return to the material substance it was invariably a part of under the museum. We can note too that in the later community visit to the MTQ, Emily refused the curator's offer to touch the Murray Upper artefacts with her bare hands, stating, 'I don't want the old people following me home'. One could say that Emily was simply remembering back to Claude's story and having a bit of fun with it. Yet the fact remains: she did not touch the artefacts. Neither did any of the senior Elders, except one, as far as I could tell. If the artefact does 'live' then for Claude and Emily it is not because it has moved here or there, or because it has a remembered biography. It lives because of the ancestor spirit contained, and now partially restrained, within it. To suggest the eventful relatedness of two people, you

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might tell another, 'they have history'. Similarly, the artefact here has a historically originating and politically ongoing relationship, rather than a biography per se, of connection to their Murray Upper family through shared Country. To explain the reality of an ancestor-artefact stuck in a far off place, we cannot rely on suggestions that artefacts are merely personified. They are rather ancestralised.

Sitting down with Claude Beeron and Emily Murray on the porch in Murray Upper made me aware of how unsettling visits to museum store rooms could potentially be. I wondered what could be done to alleviate this unease, failing repatriation. Moreover, it would be good to know how much Claude's view was shared by others in the community. How regrettable was the situation exactly? Were there any further challenges percieved by the community in the visiting scenario outlined above? And did the artefact only have spirit if its maker could be personally identified, as was the case in Claude's visit? It would be helpful to see what the rest of the community thought, and I got this opportunity when I accompanied Claude, Theresa, and Emily, together with members of their community to a museum just 'down the road'. Indeed it was not so far as the one 'down south' visited by Claude and his grandson. Instead, this was a regional museum, the MTQ in Townsville, 200 kilometres away from Murray Upper (Figure 1).

5 | GIRRINGUN PEOPLE AT THE MTQ, TOWNSVILLE

In September 2017, the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation (GAC) and the MTQ launched the *Manggan: Gather, Gathers, Gathering* exhibition. The Girringun Aboriginal Art Centre (GAAC) and the MTQ colloboratively organised the exhibit, which featured old artefacts from the South Australia Museum alongside new artefacts made by Girringun artists. Video of Elders and photographs of contemporary Country were displayed. As part of the launch, Girringun people

FIGURE 1 Mr. Claude Beeron at the MTQ, Townsville.

were invited to visit the collections store beneath the museum. Artists and Elders arrived by bus from Tully, Murray Upper, and Cardwell for the morning launch, with the collections visit scheduled for after that. Approximately 15 people made the trip to Townsville, including Claude and Emily. The entire Girringun party included North Queenland rainforest and savannah people from the nine traditional owner groups represented by Girringun, as well as a few non-Indigenous Girringun associates.

As the senior representative for traditional owners of Murray Upper, Claude Beeron requested of the MTQ that he first talk to the ancestors in the store room under the museum alone before the rest of the community joined him. At this I was reminded of the first time I visited Murray Falls in Murray Upper a few years earlier. With a young Girramay woman and a non-Indigenous journalist making a film called *Going Home to Girramay*, and my daughter, I stayed overnight at a site that was away from the public campgrounds at Murray Falls. The community site was reserved for the Jumbun Aboriginal community in Murray Upper and, as Claude explained, he had to first introduce us to the ancestors at the site before we entered to ensure they didn't 'make humbug' for us overnight. It seemed to me that this was similar to what he was doing under the museum: introducing the contingent of people (as only a senior, Guwal-speaking family member could) to calm the ancestors, and respectfully prepare them for the intrusion of visitors (some of whom would be strangers). The Murray Upper community camp site was not a secret-sacred site but it was a site of ancestors, just as the museum store was. Ancestral spirit presence at both places was plainly assumed by Claude and other Elders, as well as the rest of the visting group. Claude's preliminary talk at the musuem also made it clear to everyone that they should adopt a respectful, reserved manner whilst in the stores, in the same way I had heard called for with the Guwal word *yuray*, meaning 'quiet, sing, or talk softly', often in response to spirit presence.[vi]

To enter the MTQ stores underground, we were first required to enter a huge elevator. Even with our large number there was still plenty of space. It was slightly comical. 'Big enough for an elephant', someone quipped. We descended to the basement level and when the massive door opened we piled out and walked a short way to a door leading to the Maritime Archaeology and North Queensland collections. We had been told to wear closed-in shoes, a rule most people had heeded with sports trainers. After the MTQ curator unlocked the door with her passcard, we slowly filed into the facility. With the soft breeze of floor fans upon us, one of the first responses upon dispersing into the room was 'it's nice and cool'. The curator explained that the fans were a temporary measure for air circulation while they made improvements to the climate control system. Most people were already familiar with the dry airiness of climate control for artefacts through their experience with the keeping place at Girringun in Cardwell. However, this was clearly on a much grander scale.

The stores were essentially one vast room with many open shelving units that stretched up to a high ceiling. Larger artefacts, such as shields and decorative clothing, lay flat upon the open shelves. There were also a number of head-height, slim drawer units, all labelled with single letters. People started to move left toward the central drawer units, as this seemed to be a good kind of meeting spot. A wide table had been set up near it too, with a selection of artefacts from the Murray Upper area laid out. The curator explained that although she herself wore white gloves, everyone was free to touch and handle any of the artefacts: 'these are your things', she said. She also advised that if anything was of particular interest to people, she or the collections manager could bring them up on the computer to find out more information. After this introduction, people began to move between the open shelves and among the collections.

Although a table with a selection of Murray Upper artefacts had been set up, the experience was free of any predetermined process. So it was interesting to see what kind of items people were drawn to. Four Jirrbal and Girramay women known as 'master weavers' in the group first looked over the *mindi* dilly bags and *jawun* larger bi-cornual baskets, commenting on the skill-fully tight weave associated with traditional bag and basket-making. Another Jirrbal woman, a multi-skilled artist who made not only baskets but also eel traps, was particularly drawn to one of the baskets on the shelves. Looking at the label she saw only that it was from Murray Upper/Cardwell. She said she believed it was her mother's weaving. This was confirmed upon checking the computer system. When I later asked her how she had recognised her mother's work at a glance, she said only, 'I used to sit down with her'.

In this way, although people generally recognised all North Queensland artefacts at the MTQ as made by 'the old people', they were keen to see if they could place their close kin specifically by finding out when, as well as where, the artefacts were made. Further enquiries about provenance were therefore made. For example, someone asked the Girringun arts manager if the artefacts were from her mother's shop. This historical shop, known in the community as 'Mrs Henry's shop', was popular with tourists in the 1970s and 1980s who bought artefacts from there. The arts manager confirmed that some, but not all, had come from there. Indeed, it was known in the community that Murray Upper artefacts had moved from Mrs. Henry's shop to the James Cook University (JCU) Material Culture Unit, and then subsequently to the MTQ when JCU could no longer manage the items. Thus, there was already a recognised shared history (a shared history missing from the previously raised Lamalama case) that Girringun people were keen to elaborate.

Most everyone was excited to see a *nuba* 'water bag' sitting up on one of the higher shelves. They had tried to revive this practice of *nuba*-making at Girringun, but according to an archae-ologist volunteer at Girringun, who I spoke with about it, this particular item proved difficult to make. Drawing on the memories they had of watching their Elders, the archeologist said it was a process of trial and error for the community, with many factors in the process needing to be adjusted, for example, belting the bark pieces on different sides to give different results. In an earlier language and hertitage project, Elder Theresa Beeron told me about the process of making *nuba* directly:

> They get that certain type of bark. They call it calophyllum bark. We call it *nuba*. First they cut that bark out and they cut the outer bark and then turn it inside out I think. And then they would put it together like that. Sew both side. And then they sorta seal that thing there—if they had a lot of that kinda, wax—they probably would do it like that. Two end meet the other. Then they put that lawyer cane around to open it up—seal both sides—sew it with a lawyer cane and seal it with this wax. That's for their water bucket or collect honey. Or even they would use that ... that's not Alexander Palm, but you see how them barks like that (indicates tree at a distance) that big palm tree up there. Then they cut that—make it as some kind of a dish to carry things.
>
> (Beeron interview, 2014)

Theresa thus explains that the tree from which the *nuba* 'water bag' is made (beach colo-phyllum) is also called *nuba*. She refers to her old people, the knowledgeable makers, as 'they' collectively, deffering to them and their skill in this, though she herself was an Elder and was attempting to make *nuba* too, probably around the time of her speaking to me about it.[vii]

To return to the MTQ visit, the older women seemed reluctant to move the *nuba* bag from its shelf in the musuem, so we just admired it from where it was for a while. Later it was taken down by the collections manager so that everyone could get a closer look. The watertight seal that had been achieved with tree sap and beeswax (as Theresa notes above) was of particular interest. As already mentioned, Emily did not touch artefacts, and neither did most of the Girringun women and men, even though they were supported to by the curator. Perhaps there was some small sense of polite deference to the museum itself by not directly touching artefacts, particularly by the Elders. However, it seemed to me that touch avoidance was largely about respect and deference to the ancestors who made the artefacts, rather than to the musuem per se.

Relatedly, it is worth noting that a few young people had previously expressed to me that they would not touch any sort of modified rocks brought into the Girringun office in Cardwell (or, in fact, any rocks, if it could be helped) since these rocks might, in the worst case scenario, be from another person's country. They specifically invoked a workplace notion of 'cultural safety'. In this way, respect for one's own old people effected the same caution (touch avoidance) as the fear of 'other' (i.e. someone else's) tribal ancestors. I saw just one woman handle an artefact, as previously mentioned, and this was only because she was certain it was made by her mother. In the same way that the grandson in the museum 'down south' could safely touch his grandfather's axe, it would seem that one's mother, being known and close kin, would not make humbug for you.

One Girramay man and artist, Abe Muriata, was particularly interested in the *bagur* or swords lined up on a low shelf. His brother was trying to get him to look at the *nuba* but Abe wanted to look at the swords first. He was well renowned as a maker of *jawun*, laywer cane bi-cornual baskets, but he told me he had been trying to make a sword at home. He was having trouble finding a piece of timber that was straight, and was intrigued to see that some of the musuem swords were in fact slightly bent, so he felt this must mean he could use bent pieces for his swords. He also took pictures of the swords with his phone to study at home.

Two other middle-aged male artists, a Jiru man and a Girramay man, were over at a set of drawers full of firesticks for some time. The firesticks consisted of two parts, the anthropomorphic base (*bagu*) with two or more drilling holes, and two sticks to go with it (*jiman*), though the apparatus is collectively called *bagu* in the community. The Girramay man was one of the few people present who could make the traditional string used to tie the sticks to the base called *bumbil*—a third part of the firestick apparatus often missing from more recently collected firemakers. The slim drawers holding the *bagu* were open and at eye level so both men could get a close look at the slightly varied shapes and the ochre-painted designs. When I asked both men what they thought of the *bagu*, the Girramay man replied, 'they have too many'. He also told me that traditionally these things would have been placed in a tree and left to perish, but that their natural process was these days 'being resisted'. This was the first and only time that someone raised the idea that artefacts should not be preserved. The Girramay man remained quiet, content, it would seem, to look over the *bagu*.

There were indeed many of these *bagu* laid out in a number of drawers, perhaps 20 or more that could be seen. The *bagu* drawers attracted some interest from the rest of the group, though maybe not as much as I expected given that Girringun artists are well known for *bagu* they themselves produced (Henry, 2016). Unlike the *bagu*, the *nuba* 'waterbag' was an artefact type that they had not mastered as makers. So it is possible that, being mostly a group of artists, people were just as interested in identifying artefact-making skills as they were in identifying the artefact makers.

The youngest people present were probably around their late 30s, and this was the first time that most of them visited a state museum store. A few comments were made during and after the visit concerning the wish to see more children and young people there. For example, one woman, Bambam, had said to one of the senior Elders, 'See, I told … she should come', referring to her daughter who would sometimes come to the weekly Girringun art workshops. The young mother's comment, along with her keen interest in looking at and photographing the artefacts, seemed to express genuine excitement at being involved with something that would usually only be reserved for Elders. The MTQ exhibition, and undoubtedly the closer location (within driving distance), provided an opportunity for a large number of the descendant community to interact with their artefacts. The visit was also less formal than what might be required when an Elder as consultant is brought in to 'do a job', as Claude put it. Indeed it seemed that, without this pressure to perform a job, the experience for this middle generation of community people was ultimately rewarding. Another visit was later made, though I am unsure if many young people came, or if it was just Board members of Girringun who made the visit. Still, having made this collaborative relationship with the museum through Girringun's art centre, Bambam managed to bring her daughter later to the museum for subsequent weaving workshops that they gave for the public at the musuem, under the guidance of one of the Jirrbal senior Elders. At this, Bambam told me her young daughter excelled, or in her words, 'she took over!'.

6 | WILD ARTEFACTS

To consolidate, Girrungun people saw their artefacts as irrevocably part of their Country and community. For two cases described here (the grandfather's axe and the mother's basket), there was a strong and safe connection to artefacts known to be made by a deceased family member. For other artefacts, the connection was not one that could readily be described as 'safe', though perhaps it could be made so by the presence of descendant community members. If we accept that ancestral life is part of either a known or unknown biography, then we would call this the ancestralisation of artefacts and just leave it at that. However, I suggest that a senior Elder's initial recognition of an artefact's/ancestor's distance and isolation from kin and Country ('it was sad to leave that fella'), the restriction on its freedom of movement observed by Claude and Emily (always needing to go back to the stores), and the artefact's subsequently ambiguous temperament (in need of acknowledgement and reassurance), is what moves ancestralised artefacts toward wild artefacts.

A shared understanding of what I have called 'wild artefacts' would likely be learned, by younger generations, from Elders such as Emily and Claude, and reinforced with more interactions with the museum. Claude's speaking to the ancestors under the MTQ, for example, as he did at the Girramay campsite, showed people who had not previously been to a museum stores visit that their artefacts were not just agitated spirits who might haunt a site or place due to a formerly close connection. More correctly, artefacts were constituted from Country and kin (specifically, with an ancestor-maker), and thus, their physical presence on another country was altogether wrong. As Abe Muriata said in his speech at the opening of the *Manggan* exhibit, to somewhat foreshadow this outcome: 'There is a deep spiritual connection between these artefacts and ourselves. Now thanks to my Elder here [Claude], I talk to my basket all the time. It is a part of me' (Muriata, personal communication, 2017). For Claude, in particular, I observed that the problematic feeling of being *stuck* did not apply to artefacts stored in on-Country keeping places, since the ancestor spirit was able to roam freely

in Country, returning, or not, to artefacts constituted from them in the keeping place. We can thus speak of artefacts being 'wild' in terms of its further Aborignal English meaning, namely, an ancestor that is agitated and angry at being drawn away from home through the materials they have come to be a part of, and which are now in museum storage. Distance and the resulting splitting of the material spirit is traumatic for the ancestor; it makes them 'wild', and this wildness is percieved by the community.

Presumably, wildness would be worse with greater distance from Country. Moreover, wild artefacts in a museum may have consequences 'at home' for people, since an ancestor's spirit is being drawn out in such a novel way, both spatially and temporally. It is reasonable to suggest that this spacial stretching of Country is a traumatic rupture of localised Indigenous cosmology itself, but further research on this would be required. It shall suffice to say that, although a Murray Upper artefact 'has history', and although we potentially may be able to prove the manner of an artefact's violent appropriation given enough historical research, it is in fact Claude and Emily's understanding of artefacts—as wild—that provides in my view the strongest argument for repatriation of secular artefacts.

Strictly following this logic, museums should return all artefacts, sacred or not. Yet as I have said, not all descendant community members may want this. Moreover, there are real challenges to looking after artefacts on Country and these are recognised by descendant communities. For example, the Murray Upper Elder I previously mentioned (as knowing a 'burden of keeping') had collected artefacts over his lifetime, then sold his collection to the Muesum of Tropical Queensland. In fact I helped him to create documentation for the collection and even registered them into the regional museum's stores. Some of the reasons for bringing his peoples's arfetacts to the museum were 1) to ensure the collection was preserved for his people and 2) to make them more widely available to the public. What is additionally interesting is that the musem he sold to was closer to his community than, say, a museum 'down south' (and certainly closer than one overseas). In this way, he ensured the viability of regular access of living kin to these artefacts.

Artefacts kept close (at least in the same state as the community) mitigate against the problematic distance of wild artefacts. For this reason, regional museums are important both for the ancestor's proximity to Country per se and the community's access. The Townsville traditional owner at MTQ who opened the *Manggan* exhibititon (about artefacts brought up from Adelaide for it) tearfully said, 'Bringing these back to North Queensland is very significant for us' (personal communication, 2017). In this way, being back in the region of North Queensland was better than being in another state. Claude, too, spoke at the *Manggan* exhibition opening about his visit to not one, but *two* southern museums to the assembled audience. He told everybody that he had recently spoken to the artefacts in both 'down south' museums and told them, as mentioned already: 'You stay here. Don't worry to come home'. In this way, he conveyed his act of ameliorating the 'down south' wild artefacts. Perhaps he was also communicating a practical acceptance of the situation, given his lack of personal capacity to not only bring them back to Country, but also, to continue to preserve them as artefacts. Indeed, with regard to blue sky options, I once asked Claude outright whether Murray Upper artefacts should all be returned home, perhaps to the Girringun keeping place. His reply was dubious, even weary, since he was familiar with the high cost of collections management: 'We-ll, maybe. If Girringun could get more funding'.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper has presented failed arguments for repatriation of secular artefacts, invoking Hennessy et al.'s (2013) notion of a 'philosophy of repatriation' to foreground the current context of compromise between museums and descendant communities. It has shown that visiting artefacts at state museums is a contemporary repatriation exercise for addressing issues of access. Two visiting-artefacts events were described as examples, featuring members from the Murray Upper community represented by the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation. The story Claude Beeron told to me about the 'down south' museum, and the visit to the MTQ in Townsville with artists and traditional owners from the Girringun Aboriginal Corporation, complicated the idea of ancestralised artefacts in Aboriginal Australia, where artefacts are merely imbued with ancestor spirit. It showed the consequences of this imbuement by arguing that artefacts are not just ancestralised but wild.

State museum visits can create positive reconnections between people and things, particularly when the museums are close to Country and show artefacts that people can freely recognise as their own. Public, regional museums like the MTQ could be the viable answer to expensive community keeping places that may yet keep people locked out of their collections. Still, distance remains at the heart of the dynamic between descendant communities and their ancestors' artefacts curated off Country. Elders like Claude and Emily will teach young people that, in visiting artefacts, one is also visiting their old people. We should therefore be wary of how we may in fact amplify distance between contemporary communities and their ancestors in our efforts to bring them closer. Given that any sort of repatriation now demands the unification of artefacts with *people* as well as *place*, our biggest challenge moving forward will be how to address this paradox.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

i   The descriptor 'source community' has been criticised for implying a purely 'extractive' relationship between museums and Indigenous communities (for an example of the debate, see Peers, 2014), and so it will not be used here. I favour descendant community over origin community to emphasise the kinship-like connection between people and artefacts.

ii A Thaypan traditional owner made this comment at a Native Title boundary meeting in 2021. He was key 'boss' for this Country, hence his choice of words, 'even I'.

iii See https://www.nma.gov.au/about/publications/repatriation-handbook/introduction.

iv These are: sacred-secular, sacred-public, sacred ceremonial (public), sacred sorcery objects and secret/sacred (restricted) (Pickering, 2015, p. 431).

v Although there was no concerted attempt to hide the name of the museum on the porch, which was one of two museums he had visited down south, in this text I leave it as the 'down south' museum, as this was really the most repeated identifier used by Claude.

vi Dixon (2017) recorded a number of texts using this word *yuray* from the Guwal (everyday) Girramay, Jirrbal and Mamu dialects of Dyirbal (p. 369). It was one of the limited number of Dyirbal words still well known throughout the contemporary community, used as a gentle command to 'be quiet'.

vii Many linguists have recorded such 'process-type' narratives as a way to learn and record Indigenous languages, just as Dixon (2017) has recorded audio of this process being described in the Dyirbal language (in the Jirrbal dialect). If descendant communities were willing, exhibitions featuring archival language recordings of artefact-making processes could be used to de-emphasise English as the default communicator of Indigenous material culture practices in Australia.

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