

Storying deep time: (re)connecting Country and the museum

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Abstract

This panel explores how the experience of deep time can be brought to life in museums to allow people to connect with Country, and to connect objects held in collections with the Ancestors, spirits, continuous practices and living cultures of Australia's First Peoples. It tells the story of *Mangal Bungal* - a program of creative activities that brought Jiigurru Country (Lizard Island) and stories from the Dingaal community to Queensland Museum in Meanjin (Brisbane). *Mangal Bungal* means "clever with hands" in the Guugu Yimithirr language. The project's creative lead, Tanya Yoren, describes natural resources from Country as a "survival kit" that is activated through knowledges and techniques passed down through the generations by clever hands. *Mangal Bungal* invited the public to engage with this survival kit through both old and new story telling technologies, and to take part in the work of knowledge sharing and cultural reproduction. Through many voices this panel speaks of decades of collaboration, between the Dingaal community, archaeologists, curators and film makers that brought *Mangal Bungal* into being. It shows how science can respectfully integrate creative practice and Indigenous knowledges to tell the story of Australian deep time, and discusses the impact of that story on the thousands of people who experienced it at Queensland Museum.

Keywords

Art, Science, Indigenous Knowledges, Museums, Archaeology, Exhibitions, Public Programs, Audience Research, Planetarium.

Introduction

The museum is quiet. The doors have closed behind the last visitors, and just a few staff are left, standing in a circle in the atrium - watching.

Tanya Yoren and her Auntie, Bryanne Darkan Yoren, reach their hands into a crate and bring out a large piece of driftwood, they settle it gently into a bed of sand that they have piled into smooth mounds. From various crates and boxes, they lift shells, seedpods, coral, stones; arranging them deftly, creating a series of small intricate landscapes that stand waist high on museum plinths.

These are natural materials from Jiigurru in far north Queensland, also known as Lizard Island. They are Country. Tanya and Bryanne are Dingaal women, and Jiigurru is sacred Dingaal Country. For this NAIDOC weekend in July

2023, Jiigurru has come 2000km south to the Queensland Museum. Over the next three days 27,000 people will walk through the museum doors. Many of them will touch these materials with their own hands. Amidst the bustle of a major museum on the last weekend of school holidays, children, grandparents, people from all over the world, will gently, respectfully and with pleasure, run their fingers through the sand, feel the weight of the coral, the smoothness of the seeds.

Tanya and Bryanne's installations are a crucial part of *Mangal Bungal* - 3 days of creative activities that bring Jiigurru Country and Dingaal stories to the museum. In Guugu Yimithirr *Mangal Bungal* means "clever hands". Tanya, the project's lead artist describes natural resources from Country as a "survival kit" that is activated through techniques passed down through the generations by clever hands. Working with materials from Country connects her to her ancestors. *Mangal Bungal* brings this story-survival kit to the museum. It is an act of generosity that invites the public to take part in this ongoing work of knowledge sharing and cultural endurance, which Tanya calls "expanding the circle of responsibility".

Twenty members of the Dingaal clan, from tiny children to elders, will share their knowledge through dance, storytelling, jewellery making and totem painting. These old ways meet new ways of telling stories: Visitors will lie on their backs in an inflatable dome immersed in *The Earth Above*, a planetarium projection made in collaboration with the Dingaal community and archaeologists, which animates Jiigurru's deep history.

Visitors will also step into an exhibition - *Connections Across the Coral Sea* - that tells the story of Dingaal Country through artefacts made by Ancestors. The work of millennia of clever hands, painstakingly uncovered and reconstructed by the clever hands of archaeologists collaborating with Traditional Owners. The exhibition and the program *Mangal Bungal* together tell a story of thousands of years of trade and movement between the First Peoples of Australia and their neighbours. They also tell an important story about the relationship between archaeology and Indigenous knowledges. They show how the story of deep time can be told in many voices.

This work is the result of decades of collaboration, not only between archaeologists and Indigenous knowledge holders, but also with artists and creative storytellers, embedded in the research process.

Art has been an integral part of this journey. This is the story of how science can be done and shared differently. The research on display includes significant new evidence for Indigenous pottery-making on mainland Australia that – had the time of exhibition - had not yet been published in scientific journals (Ulm et al. 2024). These discoveries are being shared here in the museum for the first time.

In this ISEA panel we explore this meeting of stories through the voices of some of the many people who worked on this project. Speakers include Tanya Yoren, lead artist for *Mangal Bungal*, Martin Potter, co-creator of *The Earth Above*, archaeologist Sean Ulm, Queensland Museum Director, First Nations Bianca Beetson, art-science, museum and audience researchers Lizzie Muller and Lizzie Crouch, and Ngugi artist, scientist and curator Stephanie Beaupark.

Museums are already (and always) Country. This panel explores how the experience of deep time can be brought to life in museums to allow people to connect with Country, and with the Ancestors, spirits, continuous practices and living cultures of Australia's First People.



Figure 1. *Mangal Bungal* at Queensland Museum

Tanya Yoren – Lead Artist for *Mangal Bungal*

I believe that the Old People – the Ancestors and Spirits – were showing a sign that we are going to tell our story in a different way. It's about connecting your culture, your story, your dancing to the Country and bringing it alive. Bringing the Dream Time alive at the museum and giving it to someone to carry on. It's about expanding the circle of responsibility, so more people know our stories and our Country.

When you look back on Aboriginal history, it's clever with hands in a cultural way. My ancestors have been using their hands to create things with natural resources from our Country forever. By bringing the natural resources to the museum we are showing what Country is, the identity of Country. Letting people know what Jigurruru is all about.

The vision, *Mangal Bungal*, was for different kinds of activities to happen all over the museum, because when you go on Country, you are doing these things first-hand. It is active - you'll have a group of women over there catching fish and cooking traditionally. Then you'll have a group over here collecting shells. Each one of these women are on

Country. They are doing their own things naturally. They're in their own business. The Country is there to offer us the space, open spaces, so we have different places to go where we can do this and that.

With *Mangal Bungal* I felt like I was home. It felt like we are on Jigurruru, and Jigurruru was here in the museum - otherwise we wouldn't have gone through with this program. We made it home by bringing the natural resources, but also by bringing my family, bringing people in, especially, mums and dads with their children, school kids. It also felt like home because the Ancestors are here. When we visited the collection, the Ancestors made us feel at home. They were happy we were here. The energy was very mutual and calm

It was good to see the audiences. To see that they understood a lot. Even though we are all different people. We came to share one knowledge, one story. For them to understand where we come from.

Bianca Beetson – Queensland Museum Director, First Nations

Everything is storytelling, everything we do. There was storytelling in the jewellery making, in the kids painting the totems. It's all about mob telling stories. Our storytelling creates this interwoven connectedness through everything. That's why sometimes it might take three days for someone to tell a story. You have to connect the threads. You've got to listen. It all comes together at the end like a piece of woven cloth.

Mangal Bungal was about immersion. People could roll from one activity to another, and there was always a presence of Dingaal, throughout the museum: In the dancing, in the panel discussion, in the planetarium dome. Wherever you turn, there was something going on. Everything is interconnected. I called it a blakout takeover. In other words, it totally flipped the narrative. It's about First Peoples first. It's about bringing the truth forward and bringing forward blak knowledge and blak history, rather than hiding it and white-washing it.

But it was also about revitalisation of cultural practice. It was capacity-building and relationship-building. I see that as part of the museum's role in repatriating what is kept in our collections. That's another strand of the cloth. We can't do repatriation without strong relationships of trust with community.

Mangal Bungal is about truth-telling because the stories were told from the Dingaal perspective, by Dingaal knowledge-holders. That has not been allowed historically. It's always been the white researcher's voice that has been put in the position of expert on Aboriginal culture. Part of truth telling is allowing the Dingaal to say, "this is the true story of Country". It overlaps with science, which can back up these stories, but this is the centre: this is the truth.

Community are the knowledge-holders, and this was the proof. They're the ones who know Country better than anyone else. The researchers are helping scaffold and build. That's another piece of the cloth that's been created. And the museum is the loom that holds everything together while it is all interwoven and the story is told.

Martin Potter – Director of *The Earth Above*

Time feels differently reckoned after this project. *The Earth Above* planetarium show required travelling into, around and through time. To sense a constellation of generations, disrupting orderly notions of Earth's history as a linear sequence – the deepest down, the furthest back. Time and place are deranged, epochs are entangled. We become untimely. Seasons change now on human time. Erosion reveals fossilised footprint in the desert where once there were lakes. These ancestral reminders declare themselves. Country reveals itself.

The artefacts of this project are multivalent works in which both process and product illuminate new understandings (Hancox 2017). They are a creative co-construction - Indigenous knowledges and emerging research are entangled through a participatory process. This generates new and creative outcomes, methodologies and understanding of culture, language, and history (Cizek and Uricchio 2022). *The Earth Above* can be understood as a material and technological embodiment of communal relations and organisation, which aspire to produce a collectively enacted sense of place and identity (Potter 2017a). It can also be understood as enacting a shift away from a centralised vision of story-making defined by a single author or documenter, toward a collectivised storytelling practice (Potter 2017b). The result is a “living”, participatory, transmedia work defined by dialogical relationships.



Figure 2. *The Earth Above* at Queensland Museum

Sean Ulm – Research Project Co-Leader and Archaeologist

All these creative projects - *Connections Across the Coral Sea*, *Mangal Bungal*, *The Earth Above* – are not separate from our scientific publications, although we may package them as different products. In reality they are all part of the same thread that brings us back to Country.

On the very first day of the existence of CABAH, we started fieldwork with Dingaál on Jiigurru. We had filmmaker Martin Potter in the field with us. We had curators from the museum with us as well. From the beginning we had people who were tasked with visual storytelling, writing popular stories, and thinking about how we would create exhibitions. Creative collaborators were integrated into the research and involved on country from the start.

Mangal Bungal was a capstone to many years of working with the Dingaál community. It was an amazing space to support many young Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to be involved. Spending time with community on Country can change people's entire worldview. *Mangal Bungal* had that transformative impact on the people who participated.

All the researchers who took part had previously been on Country and been involved with the community. But going to Jiigurru with a plane load of people on a day trip, or even being there for a month with three male Traditional Owners is very different to spending time with 19 Traditional Owners from different generations like we did in the museum. It gives people a chance to experience what good research practice looks like. It's not simply about collecting samples from Country and publishing in journals. The program was only possible because of the longevity and authenticity of the relationships. In the museum we were working together and honouring those relationships.

Research impact is not a patent at the end of a three-year grant. It's not a machine that goes bing. It's something that contributes to the national discussion and might take a decade to have an effect.

The museum became the first place that we announced many of the findings of our research on Jiigurru. The traditional pathway to impact would be to publish the academic paper in a journal, with a prepared media package and press conference in Hope Vale. We did it differently. We had our first exhibition in Townsville, and then moved the exhibition to Brisbane where it was expanded and changed through input and feedback from the community. The research progressed through the exhibition process. It wasn't static.

In fact, “capstone” may not be the right metaphor for *Mangal Bungal*. The Dingaál community leaders have said that this collaborative research sets an example for what other communities can do. People in community will be talking about this for years to come. And literally thousands of people came to the events in the museum. It's a ripple effect. It's not just the people in the room with us, it's the people they talk to. Museums allow us to speak to people beyond our normal circles of influence. They capture people who may not even really know why they're there: They're filling in time on a rainy day with the kids.

And that feeds into a different type of conversation with people who may know very little about Australia's incredible deep history.



Figure 3. *Connections Across the Coral Sea: A story of movement* at Queensland Museum

Stephanie Beaupark – Audience researcher

Through my standpoint as a Ngugi artist-scientist-curator, I work in collaboration with Country to bridge boundaries between Indigenous science and Western science through creative practice. In this research, we facilitated audience research that created space for generative story work through yarning with a group of Indigenous students from the Griffith University Indigenous Visual Art undergraduate degree. Our safe yarning space was situated at Queensland Museum, by Maiwar, the river that runs along Meanjin (Brisbane) and into Quandamooka Country (Moreton Bay), the Islands where my ancestors lived and learned alongside Country, and where I feel deeply connected.

Our yarn with the students created space for the valuable, varied, and rich perspectives of this group to be heard. We brought to the surface perspectives of how museums can more effectively engage all human ways of knowing through accessibility for individual learning styles and abilities, building connections and opportunities for historically marginalised groups to feel welcome within museum spaces, and expressing ways of knowing as being beyond words, as being embodied within the curation, facilitation of public programs, and within the objects themselves.

Using the Indigenist research methodologies of Storywork and Yarning is essential in creating research that is inclusive and empowering for both Indigenous researchers and Indigenous contributors (Behrendt, 2019; Atkinson et al., 2021). Indigenous knowledge has always been dynamic, it has never stood still. Research is a way of enabling a channel for cultural continuity, creating new stories and knowledge pathways in our shared contemporary landscape, always on Country.

Lizzie Muller – Engagement and audience research lead and Lizzie Crouch – Creative Producer

Exhibitions are sometimes imagined as the end of long journeys of research and preparation. But they are better understood as sites of new beginnings. Audiences bring their own knowledge, create new meanings, and tell new stories through their encounters with exhibitions. *Mangal Bungal* brought ancient stories to new listeners, and it was our job to find out what they heard, and what they made of it.

Our techniques for listening to audiences dig beneath the surface of the stories they may want to tell. They are based less on narrative and more on the images that arise in visitors' minds in response to their experience. These images often speak vividly of the work the audience is doing to make sense of what they have encountered, to connect it to their lives and beliefs, and hopefully to expand their imaginations to enable them to hear and tell new stories.

The Dingaal community asked us to find out what Elders from other cultures made of their stories. So we invited a group of museum visitors over the age of 65 to speak with us. These non-Indigenous seniors described beautiful images – of wonder and awe, of emotion. They were moved by the Dingaal storytellers, by their “deep held passion” and their knowledge.

But their imagery also told a story that is more difficult to hear: A sense of despair and shame about their own culture - its lack of eldership and destructively narrow sense of time; a persistent mental hierarchy that privileges science over Indigenous knowledge; a lament for the decades of National silence about First Peoples; and an emerging understanding of the prejudice that makes it hard for even the well-meaning to listen to the truth told by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

But there is power in these difficult stories. Had the audience response been more straightforwardly positive, *Mangal Bungal* would not have been doing its work. It would have been allowing people to simply affirm their existing beliefs and assumptions. It wouldn't have been changing the story. What we are seeing in these stories is growing pains. Our analysis shows how experiences that connect people directly and richly with the living cultures of Country can unsettle prejudice, and create the space for Australians to walk forward together.

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Authors Biographies

Stephanie Beaupark is a Ngugi artist, scientist and curator who specialises in facilitating Indigenous-led knowledge exchange between Indigenous and Westernised sciences through creative practice. She is an Associate Lecturer at the University of Wollongong, a Research Associate with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage and a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong, where she is studying the Indigenous science of Australian plant dyes.

Bianca Beetson is a Kabi Kabi, Wiradjuri woman and has been a practising artist for over 28 years. She was a founding member of the seminal Aboriginal artist collective popaNOW. She has a Doctor of Visual Art, and previously lectured and directed the Bachelor of Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (BCAIA), and was Director of Indigenous Research Unit the Qld College of Art, Griffith University. Bianca is currently Director, First Nations at Queensland Museum Network.

Lizzie Crouch is a creative producer who specialises in bringing together people with different expertise, backgrounds and lived experiences to create spaces for new possibilities to emerge. She is a Senior Research Associate with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage and a PhD Candidate within the School of Art and Design, UNSW Sydney, where she is investigating the inclusive potential of interdisciplinary art-science projects.

Martin Potter is a multi-award-winning producer of transmedia, documentary and media for development projects. He is director of the [Big Stories Co.](#), president of [Engage-Media](#), associate investigator at the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Biodiversity and Heritage, a senior lecturer at Deakin University, and member of the Deakin MotionLab.

Lizzie Muller is a curator specializing in interdisciplinary collaboration and audience experience. She is a Chief Investigator with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage where she leads on creative engagement impact research.

Sean Ulm is Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous and Environmental Histories and Futures and a professional anthropological archaeologist with core expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coastal and island archaeology. For more than a decade he has collaborated with Dinggaal Traditional Owners to explore, document and protect the cultural landscapes of Jiigurruru.

Tanya Yoren is an accomplished professional with over ten years of progressive experience in culture, education, health, mining operations and community development, working for a range of societal organisations. With background studies in theology and justice she is committed to building the spiritual and cultural health of her community. Tanya was raised in Hope Vale Aboriginal Community. Her language is Guguu Yimithir, and she is a descendant of the Diingal and Nugaal clans. Tanya is a Director of Walmbaar Aboriginal Corporation. In 2023 she was the creative lead for *Manggal Bungal: Clever Hands*, a NAIDOC Week program at Queensland Museum Kurilpa in Meanjin (Brisbane).

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