

Wood, brass screws, porcelain, silver, bone: Denaturalising everyday objects in the Miegunyah archive

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Domestic object biographies

Domestic objects and the home-making practices of the settler colony are intrinsically interwoven with what Aileen Moreton-Robinson terms “white possessive logics” (2015, xiii). As Moreton-Robinson argues; within Australia, configurations of belonging, home and place are based on the dispossession of Indigenous people from their land (ibid, 3.) Paying attention to the home as a location allows us to “identify the microphysics of colonial rule” (Haskins, 2007, 125). Domestic practices are revealed as mundane and everyday processes through which stolen lands are transformed into “fabled white possessions” (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, 3).

Russell Grimwade exemplifies the rationale of presumed ownership and possession which is detailed by Moreton-Robinson. Throughout his varied pursuits, his desire to know the country he was born and lived in was tied to a desire to naturalise himself and his society within the landscape. For Grimwade (1954), nationalism was tied to a sense of duty:

There are both duties and obligations upon those of a civilized people who, for their own or their country's advantage, enter a strange and almost empty land ... Once a man is housed against weather, has food in the larder and can keep in touch with his neighbours, he has won to a position where he can begin to study his surroundings and satisfy the inborn curiosity that is the prime cause of man's accumulated knowledge. The thoughtful man in a new country like this then, becomes aware of his obligations to his successors ... No country has been so violently disturbed in its age old rest, and consequently in no country does the responsibility of preserving a knowledge of the past rest quite so heavily upon its people.

Grimwade's desire to preserve a particularly nationalistic vision of the past led to his acquisition and bequest of the items of the Miegunyah Collection. However, his words also emphasize the significance of housing, food, and sociality as intrinsic to the larger project of colonial nation-building.

The orientation of the Miegunyah archive likewise emphasizes home-making. The name of the collection itself points to domestic spaces. 'Miegunyah' is a loanword comprising of the Dhurag word 'gunyah', meaning house or dwelling, and the English possessive 'my', coming to mean "my home" in a pidgin arising in early colonial Sydney (Tent & Geraghty, 2020). However, the inclusion of domestic objects both from the Grimwade's home and further afield orients the collection towards the home.

Object biography is a method which focuses on the material and symbolic functions of objects as well as their histories. This line of inquiry reveals the entanglement of objects to other things: people, place, and other objects — providing us with insight into the social worlds they inhabit (Bauer, 2019). Our approach to object biographies from items from the Miegunyah archive is non-linear, recognising that object relations extend out in different directions. Following Joy (2009), our object biographies consist of "a series of connected jumps as they object becomes alive within certain clusters of social relationships" (540). Through this method, we foreground how the domestic objects held within the Miegunyah archive have been formed and marked by their relationships to coloniality across place and time. They are denaturalised, with complex links to the workings of empire made explicit through biographical analysis. In digging deeper into the social lives of these everyday objects, they reveal their own affordances in colonial placemaking.

Union plate & colonial possession

Domestic objects found in the Miegunyah archive embody these histories of white possession and home-making. The union plate, perhaps more so than any other item in the archive, offers a taste of the depth of this violent history. This decorative plate is from a high-society dinner service commissioned by the Hobart Union Club in July 1841 (Courier 1841). The Club was hosting a dinner for its members, and early on ran into an obstacle — the lack of earthenware production in the colonies. As a result, the Club had to source its plates from Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, England, the only place in the British Empire capable of producing fine china.

Many hands have held this plate: serving staff at the Union Club, diners at the 1841 dinner service, and eventually Russell and Mab Grimwade themselves. But also the hands of children. Pottery manufacture in Stoke in the nineteenth century was grim. Factories employed thousands of children in dirty and dangerous labour. Forced into work by family poverty, children would fetch and carry, prepare raw materials, and provide power for the few machines used (Talbot & Gratton, 2020).

On the plate, a kangaroo and emu support a shield, above the Union Club motto 'Ships, Colonies, & Commerce'. This one of the earliest depictions of Australian animals holding a coat of arms, with a rat-like kangaroo printed by the Minton designer — who had probably never seen such a marsupial. As Moreton-Robinson (2015) reminds us, this naturalisation of Australian fauna as a technique of British colonialism, transforms these creatures into symbols of white possession. In 2002, late Arabunna Elder Uncle Kevin Buzzacott (2016) reclaimed his tribe's emu and kangaroo totems from Parliament House where, he explained, they were misused in the Australian coat of arms. He was later arrested at the Aboriginal Embassy for theft, resulting in a lengthy court battle where he served the government — and the Queen — with a counter writ on charges of genocide.

At the 1841 Union Club dinner, members had farewelled William Bunster, 'one of the oldest colonists of Van Diemen's Land' who made his fortune from the brutal sealing industry in the Bass Strait, which was dependent on the kidnapping of Tasmanian Aboriginal women (Courier 1841). Another distinguished guest was in attendance: Sir John Franklin, Governor of Van Diemen's Land. Like the Grimwades, Sir John and his wife were patrons. Lady Jane established the first museum and university in Tasmania, and was deeply involved in the Hobart botanical gardens.

The Franklins also participated in the abduction of Mithina, the daughter of Towgerer, a leader of the Lowreenne people of Western Tasmania. Mithina's family were captured at gunpoint by GA Robinson and taken to Flinders Island, an offshore detention facility in the 1830s. After a routine visit by the Franklins, eleven year-old Mithina was taken to Hobart by a "smitten" Lady Franklin as house servant. She was abandoned in Tasmania when the Franklins returned to England in 1843.

Mithina later died aged 16 or 17, after being moved between Flinders Island, Queen's Orphanage, Hobart and Oyster Cove Aboriginal settlement. According to historian Lyndall Ryan (2012) Mithina is believed to have been buried in the Oyster Cove cemetery and would have been among the remains stolen by William Crowther in 1907 and sent to Richard Berry, Chair of Anatomy at the University of Melbourne.

This was not the first time Berry collected human remains. In 1985, after extensive campaigning by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, remains housed at the University were returned to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community for cremation. But stolen remains are still being uncovered. In 2003, the University of Melbourne revealed that it possessed the remains of hundreds of Aboriginal ancestors—held in the so-called Berry collection, reportedly an "open secret" among academics. Mithina's remains may have been among them, only recently returned to Country (The Age, 2003).

Conclusions

Names may change, but possessiveness endures. In 2016, the University of Melbourne removed Richard Berry's name from the School of Maths and Statistics. But Berry is still revered for his "extraordinary contribution to the discipline of anatomy" (Dobbin-Thomas, 2017) and the names of other prominent eugenicists remain inscribed in the sandstone of the University.

Conducting object biographies on domestic items within the Miegunyah archive leads us to look closely at the everyday processes of coloniality. Storied into these domestic objects are tales of violence and dispossession.

Referencing the infamous 'Butcher's Apron' or Union Jack, Moreton-Robinson (2015, 19) calls Australia 'the house that Jack built'. This is a house founded squarely on the denial of Indigenous sovereignty. Object biography in the Miegunyah archive has prompted us to ask how not only Jack, but also Mab and Russell have been involved in its construction. Following the example of Uncle Kevin Buzzacott, our next question is what it might take to start dismantling it, piece by piece.

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