

Kookaburra and Territorial Ownership

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This essay idea started with the news I saw in 2019. A white man eating at a pub took the ripping head off a kookaburra an Australian native bird that stole his potato chips on the table. After killed kookaburra, A white man threw it on the ground and then continued eating potato chips. This kookaburra's name was Kevin. Kevin was well known to pub staff and regulars in the town.¹

Kevin! I could not help but think of the Aboriginal artist Kevin Gilbert. Kevin Gilbert was also a political activist in the Aboriginal land rights and sovereignty movement. The kookaburra incident also reminded me of the sad historical background in which Native Australian Kevin Gilbert had to grow up in the Aboriginal territory, and the pain he had to endure in his life under white rule.²

In 2021, when I met kookaburra again in Fernando do Campo's work and I reminded these two Kevins.

When I first immigrated to Australia from Korea, I was terrified every day at the frequent sounds of kookaburra maddening laughter outside. Kookaburra looked cute enough to be the mascot for the 2000 Sydney Olympics³ but this bird's laughter reminded me of the witch's laughter I saw in animated films as a child. A word that mimics laughter in the Aboriginal language is “kookaburra”⁴ a very fitting name for this bird. In the 19th century Australia, settlers called the kookaburra “Laughing Jackass”⁵

Is the kookaburra really smiling? Kookaburra isn't laughing. Kookaburra said that early in the morning after the night is over, kookaburra warns other birds "We are still alive. We have had a good night. Don't enter our territory." Interestingly, analysis of the cries of the kookaburra reveals that there are several types. Their calls are commonly referred to as voices claiming their territories or voices seeking family members.⁶

I am just curious, so I am asking. Whose country is Australia when it comes to territorial ownership?

From the perspective of Asian immigrants, Australia is strongly perceived as a country of white and Western cultures. White-dominated Australia is an unavoidable reality. When I think of artists representing Australia, what comes to mind as an Asian is mainly white people. Examples include John Olsen, Sidney Nolan, and Brett Whitley. All of them are proud Australian artists.

In the eyes of immigrants from Asia, Australia's history began when whites entered the territories of Aboriginal people and seized “Territorial Ownership” from them.

This year, I met kookaburra again at the exhibition of “FERNANDO DO CAMPO: TO COMPANION A COMPANION” at UNSW Gallery. Beyond the artist and creator Campo's intentions, I interpreted his artwork based on what I felt and came up with. When I first saw the banner of the kookaburra Relocation Project (WHOSLAUGHINGJACKASS) at the UNSW Gallery, the colours of the fabric banner and the various shapes imitating the letters seemed to symbolize the multi-ethnic Australian community. It did not take long for me to understand what that piece of kookaburra-coloured fabrics, and the flag-like artifacts meant, tangled up in a mess. This banner was abstracted from the phrase “Who's smiling jackass” and was used at the MOMA FOMA Festival in Tasmania. This phrase expresses the ambiguity of who is laughing at whom. Campo and the colourfully dressed protesters carried these banners to Tasmania's Launceston streets to interrogate colonialism and anthropocentrism, with a rude laugh like a kookaburra.⁷

Why did they have to perform like this? Perhaps the appearance was funny, but also serious. Why was Campo interested in the forced displacement of kookaburra?

Inspired by this curious history of kookaburra, Campo performed with nine artists at the MONA FOMA FESTIVAL in Tasmania. The name of this performance was ‘Kookaburra Relocation Project’.⁸ Campo found records that the kookaburra began to exist in Tasmania from 1881 to 1906. Tasmania's City Park Zoo has reportedly traded Thylacine⁹ cubs for kookaburras. Although this kind of exchange was common in

¹ H Barry, "Perth man fined \$2500 for ripping head off Kevin the Kookaburra", in *Watoday.com.au*, , 2019, <<https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/perth-man-fined-2500-for-ripping-head-off-kevin-the-kookaburra-20191115-p53b51.html>> [accessed 2 June 2021].

² "Kevin Gilbert | Art Gallery of NSW", in *Artgallery.nsw.gov.au*, <<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/artists/gilbert-kevin/>> [accessed 5 June 2021]

³ "Sydney 2000 Olympic Mascots - Photos and History", in *Olympics.com*, <<https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/sydney-2000/mascot>> [accessed 17 June 2021]

⁴ "12 Aboriginal words you already know | Welcome To Country", in *Welcome To Country | Connecting Indigenous Australia*, , 2021, <<https://www.welcometocountry.org/aboriginal-words-that-went-mainstream/>> [accessed 16 June 2021]

⁵ "Laughing Kookaburra - Facts, Diet, Habitat & Pictures on Animalia.bio", in *Animalia.bio*, <<https://animalia.bio/laughing-kookaburra>> [accessed 14 June 2021].

⁶ R Sullivan, "Kooaaa! It's a kookaburra! › Nature Features (ABC Science)", in *Abc.net.au*, <<https://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2009/10/14/2712935.htm>> [accessed 6 June 2021]

⁷ "The Kookaburra Self-Relocation Project (WHOSLAUGHINGJACKASS) comes to MONA FOMA", in *Medianet*, , 2020, <<https://www.medianet.com.au/releases/183306/>> [accessed 17 June 2021]

⁸ "The Kookaburra Self-Relocation Project (WHOSLAUGHINGJACKASS) – Contemporary Art Tasmania", in *Contemporaryarttasmania.org*, <<https://contemporaryarttasmania.org/programs/the-kookaburra-self-relocation-project-whoslaughingjackass/>> [accessed 11 June 2021].

⁹ Tasmanian tiger

international trade at the time, the kookaburra introduced to Tasmania was a kind of 'Forced migration'. At around the same time, Australian Tasmanian Aborigines were treated as beasts and mercilessly slaughtered, driven by whites from their ancestral lands.¹⁰ White people from England have already taken the land from the Aboriginal people who have lived in Australia for more than 40,000 years because there is no document proving that Australia is their land. Where could there have been Western-style land documents for the Aboriginal peoples who lived in the vast and prosperous land of Australia? Only a few hundred Aboriginal people survived, and they were forcibly relocated to islands other than Tasmania. At a time when the natives suffered, the kookaburra were released into the wild in Tasmania forced to re-adapt to their unfamiliar surroundings. Campo believes that this project shows the confrontational situation between the indigenous people who are forced to migrate from Tasmania and the kookaburra, who are forced by humans to live in the unfamiliar land of Tasmania. What is common is the fact that all of this was done by the Australian government and white people. To this day, there are still many unresolved issues in Australian society regarding the human rights of Aboriginal peoples. One of the problems is the wounds of the indigenous peoples who have recently been dispossessed and had their land taken from them in the process of expanding the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta. Aboriginal peoples are still hurt by the irresponsibility, excuses, and neglect of the Australian government.¹¹ The Australian government is still imagining in vain (white people's arrogance, ignorant government, repeating history, etc.), and Campo used kookaburra's laughter to ridicule the disgusting and stupid Australian political situation. Through imperfectly fabricated banners, he offers a direction and an alternative narrative (real, fictional story intertwined with causality) for Australia's nation-building in his work, but perhaps it is still a fantasy. The world still has not changed, and this will happen again and again for many years to come. However, Campo will not stop and will fight and talk through his works.

The apology from The Museum of Tasmania (TMAG) and Royal Society of Tasmania to Aboriginals in 2021 was very late but impressive.¹² The Aboriginals were treated like beasts by the whites who occupied Australia, and the Aboriginals had to go through years of tragedy. Thus, the rights and status of the Aboriginals have been thoroughly trampled upon and ignored by the white people. The genocide and oppression of Aboriginal people by whites remains a trauma in Australian history. The beginning of an apology by the Royal Society of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Museums and Art Gallery (TMAG) and the act of taking responsibility for past mistakes were brave. However, these problems are still unresolved to this day. I think it will probably take quite a while in the future.

I believe Australia should never forget its tragic and shameful history and should educate the Australian public that history will never be repeated. In addition, artists must continue to remind people of these wounds and history through their skills. The only way to solve problems with Aboriginal peoples is the Australian Government's active response and efforts for reconciliation. The perpetrators, the victims, and the complex history between them must be unravelled, and this work must continue delicately. A thorough reflection on Australian history begins now. Australian artists must continue to voice the Australian Government's need to reflect on its past wrongdoings towards Aboriginal people. I think what Australia needs most is a sincere, deep, and positive apology. It is ultimately up to the Aboriginal peoples to decide whether and how to forgive. By restoring erased memories and forgotten history to art, Campo shows the possibility of change penetrating art and life. In the age of loss in the 21st century. Fernando do Campo's kookaburra sounds as if he is ridiculing the stupid circumstances of the world and foolish people who dream in vain.

¹⁰ L MacDonald, "Thirty Aboriginal men were killed, but not many people remember the Cape Grim massacre", in *Abc.net.au*, , 2019, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-13/bid-to-mark-tasmanian-aboriginal-massacres-like-cape-grim/10803516>> [accessed 3 June 2021].

¹¹ K Burke, "Indigenous group 'sickened' by Powerhouse Museum expansion: 'It treats our land as terra nullius'", in *the Guardian*, , 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/oct/31/indigenous-group-sickened-by-powerhouse-museum-expansion-it-treats-our-land-as-terra-nullius>> [accessed 9 June 2021].

¹² E Cooper, "'Nearly 200 years of practices were morally wrong': Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal communities over art thefts", in *Abc.net.au*, , 2021, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-15/apology-to-tas-aboriginal-communities-over-art-culture-thefts/13153392>> [accessed 5 June 2021].