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# (Re)Presenting Indigenous Histories of the First World War: Case Studies for Museums

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Over 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers fought in WW1, at a time when they had few rights on home soil. While on active duty many of these soldiers received the same conditions and respect as their non-Indigenous counterparts. Yet when they returned it was back to a life of discrimination, and their stories were silenced. In the decades after the war, Indigenous voices were rarely present in the memorialising of the ANZAC legend. For museums trying to commemorate the centenary of WWI the absence of tangible collections relating to Indigenous soldiers presents a challenge. How do you exhibit what you do not have? In recent years the arts have been one of the most prominent means of drawing attention to the experiences of those who served. From the play *Black Diggers* to Tony Albert's sculptural installation *Yininmadyemi—Thou didst let them fall*, leading artists have been creating spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to commemorate family members' contributions, and raise their stories into the collective Australian consciousness. This paper will explore the role that the arts can play in creating a true and representative ANZAC mythology within Australia's cultural institutions.

□ First World War, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers, Contemporary art, museums

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The year 2018 marked a century since the end of the First World War, an event which to this day still casts a long shadow on Australian identity and cultural memory. The Anzac soldier, for instance, is one of the most pervasive icons of Australian history and has taken on almost mythic qualities in the national psyche.<sup>1</sup> According to popular retellings, Australia as a nation was born on the battlefield of Gallipoli, while the Anzac qualities of mateship, sacrifice, humour and humility are the cornerstones of Australian identity. Yet for most of last century, the Anzac legend has been a predominantly white history, and the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers in the First World War have been either neglected or suppressed. Recent contributions by a number of scholars (Huggonson 1988; Scarlett 2012; Newman et al 2015) have begun to address this forgotten history by demonstrating the real extent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service in the war. However, the historic absence of Indigenous stories in the memorialisation of the conflict has provided particular challenges for museums developing centenary exhibitions focussed on the present-day commemoration of the First World War and its legacy. This volume of the *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* examines First World War stories through material objects, but in the case of Indigenous war histories similar methodologies are difficult. How do object-focussed museums exhibit stories whose tangible remnants are absent from their archives?

This paper considers the question of exhibiting absent histories both as contemporary concern and a historical product for museums. We argue that the current focus on reclaiming the history of Indigenous soldiers in the First World War is part of a larger, ongoing debate about the absence of Indigenous voices and their war stories within museum narratives. Here we discuss the institutional, political and ideological factors that have led to the archival absence of Indigenous war histories in museums, and examine some of the strategies institutions today are taking to address that silence. In particular, we look at how contemporary art and artists have been engaged in constructing new

narratives, and creating responses that both shed light on the history of Indigenous war service and commemorate the sacrifices of black diggers at home and overseas.

### **‘NOT SUBSTANTIALLY EUROPEAN OF ORIGIN’: INDIGENOUS SERVICE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

It is estimated that more than a thousand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men fought for Australia in the First World War. The exact numbers and stories of these men will likely never be known, as many had to conceal their heritage in order to enlist. However, recent efforts by scholars including Philippa Scarlett (2012) and Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell (1993) have gone a long way towards reconnecting the personal stories and service records of Indigenous soldiers, and rewriting their names and sacrifices on the public record. The work of local history societies in Indigenous communities including Cherbourg (Newman et al 2015) and Beaudesert (Mason 2016) have also added to our understanding of the roles played by Indigenous soldiers during the war and the persecution they faced upon return. The histories of these men are often difficult to reconcile with the popular image of the First World War and its place in the Australian national identity.

Unlike their white Australian counterparts, Indigenous servicemen had to circumnavigate multiple discriminatory laws and regulations in order to join the armed forces. When the war broke out, the White Australia Policy was firmly established in Australia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not recognised as citizens of the country. Military policy also limited opportunities as *The Defence Act 1909* prohibited service by those who ‘were not substantially European of origin,’ while the regulations booklet supplied to recruitment officers clearly stated that ‘Aborigines and halfcastes are not to be enlisted. This restriction is to be interpreted as applying to all coloured men’ (Winegard 2009, p. 195). As a result, many prospective recruits had to hide their Indigenous heritage, claiming to be New Zealand

Maori or Indian as a way of explaining their dark skin (Winegard 2009). In 1916, Stradbroke Island man Albert Tripcony enlisted as a 'black Italian' (Bennett 2014), and many others used false names in their military records. Evidence from soldiers' attestation papers also reveal that some men attempted to enlist several times after initially being rejected (Scarlett 2012).

By 1917, following heavy casualties on the battlefield and Australia's rejection of compulsory conscription, the need for more men on the front began to outweigh racial prejudices, and restrictions governing enlistment eased. As a result, Indigenous men were able to enlist provided that they could prove that at least one of their parents was of European ancestry. Men such as Douglas Grant, who enlisted in 1916 but was later discharged due to his Aboriginality, managed to re-enlist in 1917, adding to the numbers of Indigenous soldiers in active service. Grant himself was considered something of a novelty by Australian media during the war. Raised by his adoptive Scottish parents, he could recite Shakespeare as well as play the bagpipes. As such his story better aligned with popular images of the Anzac digger, and Grant went on to become one of the most celebrated Aboriginal soldiers of the First World War (Riseman 2014).

For historians looking back at these events, the apparent desire of Indigenous men to join the armed forces in the face of such discrimination raises a number of questions. What motivated these men to fight for a country that did not recognise them in what was essentially a European war? Yet it appears that their motivations were as varied as those of any other soldier and likely included desire for better pay, opportunities to travel, persuasive recruitment propaganda, and the chance to fight alongside friends and family. Indeed, in comparison to the other employment opportunities afforded to young Indigenous men in Australia at the time, the Australian Defence Force offered attractive incentives such as equal pay for equal work. Other more complicated motivations include what appears to be a genuine wish to serve their country, and a belief that service would lead to greater equality

for Aboriginal people back home. According to the aunt of Darug man William Castles, he was eager to fight for 'his king and country' (Scarlett 2012, p. 36). Years after the war, Reginald 'Reg' Saunders, Second World War veteran and the first Aboriginal man commissioned as an officer in the Australian Army claimed he fought not for England but for Australia, and paid tribute to the Indigenous soldiers who had gone before him in the First World War and the Frontier Wars.

No I never fought for anybody but Australia. I always was loyal to my country...I didn't want the King or the Queen of England because I'd have been just as happy fighting against them, Australia is my country. I don't owe any allegiance or loyalty to the Queen of England, they tried to bloody destroy me, and my family, my tribe, my people... see we were the first defenders of Australia – the English never ever defended Australia at all, we did and we suffered very badly for that. (Saunders and Read 1987)

Saunders considered his service 'merely followed in the footsteps of hundreds of other Aboriginals in world war one.'

The opportunities presented by military service during the First World War stand in sharp contrast to the treatment young Indigenous men could expect at home. As prominent Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton argues, service provided one avenue for Aboriginal people to be treated with a civility that distinguished them from the cultural stereotypes of the time (Bennett 2014). Indeed, while we have little available information about what life was actually like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers on the frontline, surviving accounts from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous soldiers suggest that to a limited extent, racial prejudices were forgotten on the battlefield. As Douglas Grant wrote following the war, 'The colour line was never drawn in the trenches' (Riseman 2014, p. 160–161). Reflecting on the events of past wars, Pastor Ray Minniecon, founder of the Coloured Diggers movement stated,

'On the battlefield, bullets don't discriminate; they kill black people or white people, so when it came to war all of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women were treated as equals' (Gorman 2015).

Any hopes that the greater equality experienced on the battlefield would continue upon their return to Australia were short lived, and returned Indigenous soldiers were denied the same treatment as their non-Indigenous comrades. Few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers received war pensions, and the men were not granted the land parcels given to returned soldiers under the various state government Soldier Settlement Acts. At sites such as Coranderrk and Lake Condah in Victoria, the very land allocated as farms for returned soldiers had been partitioned from Indigenous settlements. Jobs were also hard to come by for returned soldiers. Despite being celebrated during the war as an example of a 'civilised' or 'assimilated' Indigenous man, Douglas Grant was unable to find any work other than labouring jobs following the war (Riseman 2014).

Indigenous veterans also faced discrimination within the Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League (RSSILA, later known as the RSA). Across Australia, Aboriginal soldiers were barred from entry into Leagues clubs and personal accounts from soldiers also speak of black diggers being refused entry to pubs following Anzac Day marches (Scarlett 2012). This return to a life of discrimination led to frustration and despair among many soldiers. In a letter to the anthropologist Caroline Kelly-Tenant, one Cherbourg-based veteran wrote, 'I always thought that fighting for our King and country would make me naturalise british [sic] subject and a man with freedom in the country but ... [the Chief Protector] places me under the act and put me to a settlement like a dog' (Murphy 2010).

The poor treatment of Indigenous servicemen upon their return to Australia is also reflected in the silencing and neglect of their stories and contributions in official war histories. In the decades following the war, the service and sacrifice of the

black diggers was rarely mentioned in discussions of the Anzac legend, nor were they featured in the war memorials that were built in across the country. At the Australian War Memorial in Canberra there is no reference to Aboriginal soldiers in the official honour rolls. Instead, a separate memorial sits in the bushland behind the institution. This plaque is not an official government memorial but was built by private citizens. While in recent years the Australian War Memorial has been actively engaged in addressing Indigenous histories of the war, the legacy of historical absences is still felt.

Indeed, the question of how to make present the story of black diggers is one that has faced many museums in recent years as through both state and federal funding, most major museums in Australia have been involved in developing exhibitions, school programs and events that commemorate the war and reflect on its legacy.<sup>2</sup> For many of these institutions, the Anzac centenary provides an opportunity to present more diverse and inclusive histories of the war, with several seeking to highlight the Indigenous experience of the conflict. For instance, the South Australian Museum staged the exhibition *Aboriginal ANZACS: from South Australia to the Great War* (23 Jun 2016–07 Aug 2016) while the Australian War Memorial's exhibition *For Country, For Nation* opened in 2016 and is set to tour the country until 2021.

## **ABSENCE, MEMORY AND THE MUSEUM**

Absence is a complex and challenging issue for museums as arguably one of the priorities for such institutions is to make present through objects, text and image people and stories that are separated from audiences by time and distance. Absence in museums takes many different forms which can all act to silence some narratives, often those associated with marginalised and difficult histories. Margaret Tali (2018) identifies three kinds of absence in museums: material absence, phenomenological absence and discursive absence. These refer respectively to the absence of material within archives, absence through the

ways knowledge is represented by the museum and in turn interpreted by audiences, and absence that is created through the textual and communicative presencing of an alternative narrative.

All of these forms of absence have contributed to the silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander war histories in museums and other cultural institutions. At the material level of the archive, the necessity for men to lie about their indigeneity has meant that surviving records often recall them under false names and ethnicities. It is likely that there are records of Indigenous soldiers that will never be reconnected with their true identities. Traditionally poor relations between Aboriginal people and museums in Australia have also meant that Indigenous families are less inclined to donate their relatives' war mementoes to museums. At the levels of communication and interpretation in museums, the story of discrimination and racism experienced by men who fought the country has often been ignored in favour of the more familiar representation of the First World War, which focuses on the heroism of soldiers and the role they played in the construction of an Australian identity.

The challenge of exhibiting difficult histories within a dominant or national historical framework relates to the complex nature of memory, both individual and collective, and its relation to history making. In his analysis of the relationship between history and memory, Le Goff (1992) argues that both history and memory are subject to manipulations by individuals and societies, and that what is forgotten or not mentioned by history can reveal the mechanics at play in the manipulation of collective memory. Le Goff cites the proliferation of monuments commemorating the First World War as a particularly strong example of the documents of history being used to inscribe national unity on a collective memory. The negotiations of remembering and forgetting, both individual and official, that have gone into the creation and messaging of Australian war memorials have been discussed by Stephens (2014), who argues that in memorialisation, difficult elements of the war such as the trauma, violence, disfigurement and mental illness experienced

by soldiers are frequently masked in favour of a national ideology of remembrance. While oral histories of surviving veterans has gone some way to untangling the subjective nature of the Anzac legend from the lived experiences of soldiers (Thomson 2013), that avenue is now closed to historians as there are no surviving First World War veterans to be interviewed.

Like war memorials, museums have been complicit in national forgetting, and their displays associated with the silence of certain difficult histories. For instance, Edwards and Mead (2013) argue that in Britain, difficult colonial histories form part of a museum absence or amnesia precisely because those histories cannot be fully contained in the past, and therefore there can be no catharsis through their representation in the present. The presencing of the colonial histories is often addressed inadequately within museums because engaging with the story also means engaging with the full impact of its legacy. The same can be argued for the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers, and indeed the treatment of Indigenous people in Australia more broadly, as the presencing of historical discrimination risks highlighting ongoing inequality.

Therefore, for museums that are today attempting to revisit this history the challenge is complex. Firstly, how to construct a counter-narrative of Indigenous perspectives of war from an incomplete archive? Secondly, when telling the stories of the Indigenous experience of the war, how do they reflect on the historic absence of stories that their own past institutional practices have been complicit in silencing? As a result of recent First World War centenary commemorations, these questions have been increasingly been in the public eye and have been faced by most museums in Australia. However, we argue that these questions are not new, nor are they unique to the history of the First World War. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have served in almost every military conflict that the nation has been involved with since the First World War. They have also experienced earlier conflicts, namely the land wars on the frontiers

of European settlement from the late eighteenth century until the early twentieth century. These stories are also absent from museums and archives, and previous attempts to bring them more into the national consciousness have proved controversial. Therefore, any current considerations of exhibiting absent First World War histories need to be viewed in the context of deeper conflicts between history, memory, national identity and the Indigenous experience as they are represented in Australian museums and education institutions.

## HISTORY WARS IN AUSTRALIA

Absence within Australia's historical timeline is not exclusive to museums. In colonised countries 'history wars' take commonplace in national debate (McKenna 1997). There is often an unwillingness to acknowledge the violent and troubled past of British Imperial expansion in favour of historical timelines that begin with settlement and ignore acts of genocide. From 1788 Australia's shared history has been largely disputed. In his Boyer Lectures of 1968, W.E.H Stanner (1969, p. 25) spoke of the 'cult of forgetfulness' within Australia's documented history, arguing that, 'we have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so'. Although not the first historian to note the absence of Aboriginal perspectives in documented history, Stanner's remarks suggest that absence has played a role in anthropology long before the terms history and culture wars entered national and international discourses in the late 1980s.

In Australia, the history wars first peaked in 1988; the year of the bicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet. In contrast to the federally planned colonial reenactments, Aboriginal protesters wore black armbands to mourn the occasion (Macintyre and Clark 2004). Later that year, then opposition leader John Howard released the Future Directions policy calling for a unified Australia with a shared ethos that was unapologetic of the past (McKenna 1997). This patriotic remembering of the past, often politically motivated, does not favour the Indigenous

perspective of Australia's timeline. Arguably, the history wars continued for over a decade, although contemporary responses to historical events indicate that this debate has not been resolved. In 1996, Prime Minister John Howard popularised the term 'black armband' view of Australian history and called instead for a more optimistic narrative. At the heart of this argument is the politicising of national identity. Similar to the narrative of the Anzac legend is the romantic notion of Australia as the 'lucky country'. Provoking imagery that privilege Imperial notions of remembering and not the voices of those marginalised through colonisation. The push for a more positive albeit silencing approach to remembering Australia's colonial history can be attributed to 'national anxiety about the nature and extent of historical responsibility, of how it might be expressed, and of what obligations it incurs for the present generation' (Nettelbeck 2011, p. 1116). This apprehension, along with a desire for a unified national identity, influenced the Howard Government's unwillingness to apologise for the Stolen Generations. Although there are differing perspectives on the Rudd Government's 2008 Apology in creating change for Indigenous peoples, the outcomes of this historical admission did not lead to any progress in education and other policy surrounding Indigenous history. Many hold the Apology as the conclusion of the history wars debate; however, responses to Indigenous perspectives on history indicate these arguments have yet to be resolved. In more recent times, a section in the University of New South Wales *Diversity Tool Kit* highlighted that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people find the phrase Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia offensive. Responses from media indicated that the 'history wars' were far from over. For instance, Alan Jones proclaimed this suggestion to be a return to the 'black armband view of history' (*Financial Times*, 1 Apr 2016). As a response to the continued history wars contemporary museums provide a space for the debate surrounding contested foundational history.

There have been numerous attempts by cultural institutions to address the disputed nature of

Australia's colonial past. In 2011, the National Museum of Australia exhibited *Contested Frontiers*. This exhibition provided a Wiradjuri perspective on the Bells Falls massacre and received much criticism, notably from Keith Windschuttle who called the exhibition a 'black armband' view of history (Nettelbeck 2011, p. 1117). The dispute around *Contested Frontiers* highlights the lack of clarity around institutional ownership of this narrative. Along with the absence of memorialising black diggers, there is no space given to the frontier wars in the Australian War Memorial. As noted by a spokesperson from the institution in 2015, 'The Frontier Wars should be acknowledged, but the appropriate cultural institution to represent them should be the National Museum of Australia' (Provast 2015). Such a statement reflects a broader denial of Australia's colonisation as a war history.

### **ADDRESSING ABSENCE: CONTEMPORARY ART AND NEW NARRATIVES**

While debates about the institutional settings of Indigenous counternarratives to national histories roll on, the issues of representation and the forgotten history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander war service have found a voice within contemporary arts. Over the last decade the response of artists to Indigenous military services has been varied and covered multiple media. These range from commissioned public works to interventions in museum spaces and theatrical responses to local, family and official histories.

Contemporary arts offer one avenue through which contested histories can be brought into public consciousness by creating material presences for stories that have been absent in archives, and reasserting Indigenous voices into historical narratives. In the wake of postcolonial and postmodern strategies in museums, contemporary art is increasingly entering the museum space as a means of addressing difficult histories, and diversifying institutional narratives (Stearn 2014). As Barrett and Millner (2014) argue, the visual

arts have played an important role in addressing postcolonial histories in Australian museums. For instance, Fiona Foley's 1997 work *Lie of Land*, which currently sits outside the entrance to the Melbourne Museum was commissioned by the City of Melbourne to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the 1967 referendum on Indigenous rights to vote. When the National Museum of Australia staged *Encounters*, a 2015 exhibition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material culture held by the British Museum, they invited contemporary Indigenous artists to create their own responses to the exhibition narratives, and histories of colonial collecting.

In the light of centenary commemorations of the First World War there have been a number of creative responses by contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. In the lead up to Anzac Day 2014, the Sydney-based street artist Hego erected a nine-metre tall mural of an Indigenous man in First World War uniform on the corner of 'The Block', an iconic Aboriginal-managed housing estate in the Sydney suburb of Redfern. Hego followed up that work with the mural *Black Anzacs* in the South Australian town of Meningie. Both works feature large-scale renderings of historical photographic portraits of Indigenous soldiers. At the Canberra Glassworks, the 2015 exhibition *Distant Warriors: Ka Maumahara (We Will Remember) Let Us Not Be Forgotten*, featured the works of ten contemporary Aboriginal and Maori glass artists who had created pieces inspired by the stories of Indigenous men who had hidden their identities in order to enlist.

Here we discuss three examples in which contemporary art has been used to represent and re-present forgotten histories and Indigenous experiences of the First World War. These are drawn from different institutions including theatre, galleries and museums. The examples demonstrate different ways that contemporary art acts as a dialectic tool within exhibitions and displays, and how contemporary voices can speak to forgotten histories.



## **BLACK DIGGERS**

Queensland Theatre Company's 2014 play, *Black Diggers*, is an example of the performing arts re-presenting untold histories on a national scale (figure 1). Written by Tom Wright and directed by Wesley Enoch, the production involved significant research to retell First World War narratives through the experiences of Indigenous soldiers. Although the soldier's stories were familiar, they presented an Indigenous perspective on the war (Syron 2015, p. 228). This opened the wider Australian audience to additional narratives on a well known tale. Reviews of the play noted that there are no black armbands or white blindfolds in *Black Diggers*, just the fluid accounts of real experiences and lives (Behrendt 2014). As commented by Enoch: 'Our myth-making as a country is such that we often like to forget our Aboriginal history. So when you tell a story like this, people say: What? There were Aboriginal people at

Gallipoli?' (Nicholson 2013). This statement closely parallels discussions within museums of their drive to tell Indigenous stories and address gaps in historical collections.

*Black Diggers* is set in five parts: Pre-nation, Enlistment, the Theatre of war, the Return and Legacy. The structure of the narrative provides context that will be challenging for museums. For instance, how to include the black diggers' stories while also highlighting their historical silence? According to director Enoch, 'One of the purposes of Indigenous theatre is to write on the public record neglected or forgotten stories' (Wright 2014). For museums this presents opportunities to work with Indigenous artists to create material presence in galleries and collections for untold stories. The play highlights that the legacy of the war for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is unknown. After one hundred years, this conversation has only begun, and *Black Diggers* has been one of the catalysts.



FIG. 1. Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival production of *Black Diggers*. Image Queensland Theatre Company, Photography by Rob Maccoll.

The impact of the play also extended into the visual arts. For their First World War centenary exhibition, *All that Fall*, the National Portrait Gallery of Australia commissioned a series of video works featuring the cast of *Black Diggers* reading from historical letters by Indigenous veterans that described their experiences during and after the war (figure. 2). According to the exhibition's co-curator, Dr Anne Sanders (pers. comm. 2016, 23 August 2018), the desire to include elements from *Black Diggers* in *All that Fall* came after she had seen a performance of the play on Australia Day, 2014. The stories in the

letters read by the actors embodied the exhibition's underpinning themes of sacrifice, loss and absence. For the curators, commissioning the contemporary video works offered a way to extend the narrative of the play and help it find a new audience. It is interesting to note that the *Black Diggers* video portraits were the only works in the exhibition that featured the physical human body. In this way both the play and the video works demonstrate the power of contemporary art to make tangible elements of history that had previously not been found in history books or official records.

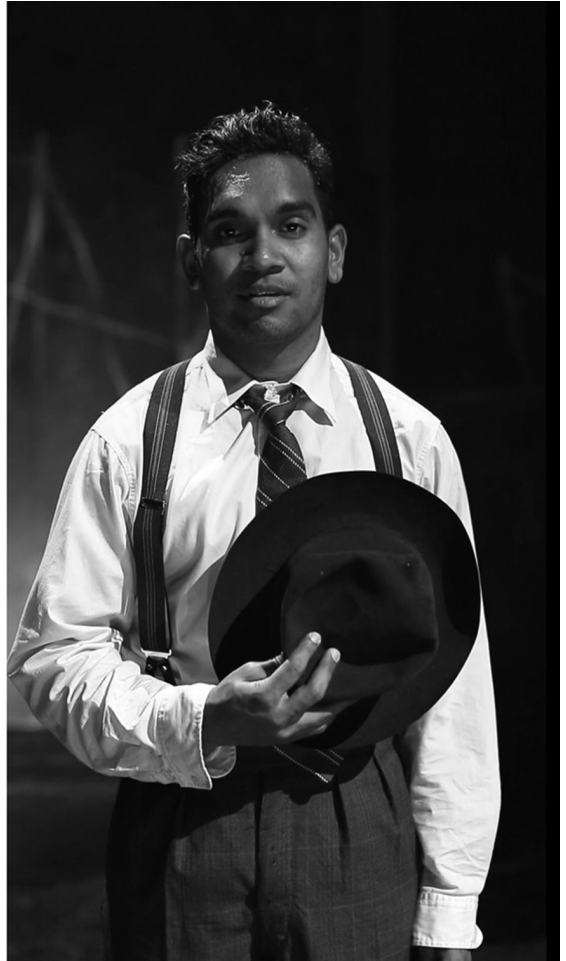


FIG. 2. Actor Tibian Wyles in *Black Diggers* by Tom Wright, directed by Wesley Enoch. A Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival Production, originally produced by Queensland Theatre Company and Sydney Festival. Still from a video portrait created in collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery. Image supplied by the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.

## **YININMADYEMI-THOU DIDST LET FALL TONY ALBERT**

The sacrifices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen at war and at home also provided the focus for the City of Sydney's Indigenous War Memorial *Yininmadyemi-Thou didst let fall*, by contemporary Aboriginal artist Tony Albert (figure 3). The public artwork was commissioned by the City of Sydney as part of their Eora Journey project, which is curated by Hetti Perkins and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in Sydney. The memorial features four standing bullets and three fallen shells which symbolically represent not only those who fell on the battlefield and those who survived, but also the differences in how Indigenous servicemen were treated when they returned home.

Albert drew on his own family's experiences of wartime service, and the absence of these stories in mainstream institutions. According to Albert, 'These are stories that are not written into history; they aren't represented in our institutions... It's long overdue. It's confronting. It might ruffle a few feathers but they are feathers that need to be ruffled' (Kembrey 2015). The memorial serves not only to commemorate the First World War, but also the Frontier Wars and Indigenous sacrifice more generally. An inscription carved on the bottom of one of the fallen shell cases written by Tony Albert and Anita Heiss reads:



FIG. 3. Tony Albert, *Yininmadyemi-Thou didst let fall*. Image: City of Sydney.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always defended their country. Indigenous Australia are known to have served in the state colonial forces before Federation and have proudly carried on this tradition of service.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander diggers experienced the horror of war on the battlefield and many made the ultimate sacrifice. The sad reality for these veterans was that equality in the country they fought to defend remained a distant dream.

This memorial on the land of the Gadigal clan pays tribute to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have defended our country – the unsung heroes, our brothers and sisters, our mates.

We remember those fallen. We honour those standing.

*Yininmadyemi* responds to the absence of Indigenous stories within war memorials by creating a new space for official commemoration within the public domain.

## **NEW ZEALAND AT WAR, AUCKLAND WAR MEMORIAL MUSEUM**

The challenge faced by Australian museums is not unique as indigenous peoples from across the British Empire participated in the First World War, often despite discriminatory policies in their home countries (Winegard 2012). The Anzac legend celebrates the special bond between Australia and New Zealand, and yet the response to histories of indigenous participation in wars have been treated very differently in each country. Unlike in Australia, museums in New Zealand acknowledge the New Zealand Wars as the first occasion in which Maori were involved in warfare with Europeans.<sup>3</sup> And while the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers in the First World War only came to the attention of historians from the 1980s, in New Zealand the role of the Maori Pioneer Battalion was recorded in historical accounts from as early as the 1920s.

In New Zealand, more than two thousand Maori and more than four hundred Pacific Islanders served in the Maori Contingents and Pioneer Battalion. This was the only indigenous combat unit from any British Dominion that fought during the war. Under *The New Zealand Defence Act 1909* Maori were not prohibited from military service, although they were exempt from the compulsory conscription required of *Pakeha* (white) New Zealanders under *The Military Service Act of 1916* (Winegard 2012). When the war broke out Maori were not directly recruited; however, in 1917 *The Military Service Act* was extended, making conscription compulsory for Maori for the first time.

Many of these stories are commemorated in Auckland War Memorial Museum's exhibition *Pou Kanohi New Zealand at War*, which opened in 2017. The exhibition is a history of New Zealand's involvement in the war and explores the legacy and relevance of the conflict for New Zealanders today. Alongside artefacts and interactive displays, the exhibition contains a number of commissioned contemporary artworks made by local Maori artists. Rather than being used to fill a material absence of Maori involvement in the war, these works aim to create a shared space for remembrance and reconciliation. The artworks are intended to express the weight of loss and suffering that are unable to be fully expressed through words. As contemporary interpretations of *taonga* (treasures) held in the Maori collections of the museum, they also bridge temporal and spatial distances within the collections.

The contemporary commissions include a lintel *Paremauri* by Rangi Kipa, which sits at the entrance of the exhibition and symbolises the threshold into the space of remembrance. The exhibition space itself is contained within a carved representation of a panel of taaniko waving attached at either end to weaving pegs. *Te Whatu-a-Mahara* by Bernard Makoare are oversized versions of weaving pegs, which in the context of the exhibition represent the weaving together of past and present, and the

reconciliation that followed the war. *Te Hononga* by Beronia Scott wraps the exhibition in a *kaokao* weaving pattern, which symbolises the strength of New Zealand soldiers and the connections that bind people, families and communities together. The exhibition also includes a woven memorial to the fallen by the Maori weaver Maureen Lander, and a video work in which six young Maori and Pacific Islander poets perform spoken word poetry relating the stories of Maori and Pacific servicemen to significant landmarks in Auckland.

The exhibition highlights indigenous experiences of the war in a different way to either *Black Diggers* or *Yininmadyemi*. Rather than presenting a counter narrative of official histories, the contemporary works attempt to embed Maori philosophical frameworks in the representation of all of New Zealand's war history. Absence and memory are used to process loss and grief, rather than silence history.

## ONGOING ABSENCE? LESSONS FOR MUSEUMS

Contemporary art can never go all of the way to repairing the past wrongs that museums are now seeking to address. There are also risks for museums in relying too heavily on the artist's voice as an outsider speaking to absent histories, and failing to address the ways in which their own institutions have been complicit in silencing those histories. However, as the case studies presented here have demonstrated, the ways in which museums, artists and Indigenous communities can work together to present diverse histories of the First World War provides one framework with which to address absence, and the conflict between history and memory in institutions more broadly.

We began the process of writing this paper thinking that we were only writing about Indigenous experiences of the First World War, but found the task impossible without also considering the Frontier Wars and the ongoing culture wars taking place in Australia. Central to discussions of all of these conflicts is the question of how to address Australia's colonial

past within discourses of national identity. These debates are ongoing, and the processes through which institutions have attempted to address absent Indigenous histories of the First World War also offer important lessons for museums looking forward. As the familiar adage goes, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. If we do not learn from the history of Indigenous First World War service, and its changing historiography over the past century, issues of Indigenous representation in classrooms, museums and war memorials will continue to be contested.

As the centenary commemorations of the First World War come to a close, attention will soon shift to marking anniversaries of the Second World War. The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who enlisted to fight in that conflict bear striking similarities to the First World War. William Cooper, Aboriginal activist and founder of the Australian Aborigines League lost his son Dan on a European battlefield in 1917. Upon the eve of the Second World War in 1939, William Cooper wrote to the Minister of the Interior calling for better treatment of Aboriginal servicemen this time around.

I am a father of a soldier who gave his life for his King on the battlefield and thousands of coloured men enlisted in the A.I.F. They will doubtless do so again though on their return last time, that is those survived, were pushed back to the bush to resume the status of aboriginal... the aboriginal now has no status, no rights, no land and ... nothing to fight for but the privilege of defending the land which was taken from him by the white race without compensation or even kindness. We submit that to put us in the trenches, until we have something to fight for, is not right. (Jackomos & Fowell, 1993, p. 9)

For museums, this repeating history from the First to the Second World Wars should give pause to think about how the challenges of commemorating absent histories will also return. Lest we forget.

## CONCLUSIONS

Recent years have witnessed not only an explosion in the memorialisation of the First World War, but also increasingly prominent critiques of the role of absence and forgetfulness in the Anzac legend. Because the First World War and the Anzac legend occupy such an important place in Australian consciousness, the issues of absent Indigenous histories and institutional amnesia have been able to be reconsidered and made visible within museums and the national narrative. This paper has explored the historical absence of Indigenous war stories from Australia's cultural institutions, and presented case studies that demonstrate different ways in which war memorials, art galleries and museums have adopted contemporary Indigenous art as a means of communicating absent histories. These works seek to both address the silence, and tell the stories of Indigenous war histories. And while there are limits to what can be achieved through the use of contemporary art as a dialogic device within museum, the approaches offer possible pathways for museums telling previously absent First World War and other difficult histories.

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## □ ENDNOTES

1. The mythologising of the First World War soldier was a phenomenon seen in other British settler states such as Canada, which at the end of the war were also defining their own national identity as distinct from but still part of Imperial Britain (Sheftall 2015). However, the extent to which this ideal remains part of a national identity has arguably been most strongly felt in Australia and New Zealand.
2. For example: *WWI: Love and Sorrow* (Melbourne Museum, 30 Aug 2014 - 30 Nov 2018); *The Home Front: Australia During the First World War* (National Museum of Australia, 3 Apr - 11 Oct 2015); *Colour in Darkness: Images from the First World War* (State Library of New South Wales 25 Jun - 21 Oct 2016); *The Great War in Broad Outlines* (touring exhibition 2017).
3. The New Zealand Wars were a series of conflicts between European settlers and Maori that took place between 1845 and 1872.