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After Boomalli: Art, Activism, and Feminism - Fiona Foley in Dialogue with Paola Balla

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After Boomali: Art, Activism, and Feminism

Fiona Foley in Dialogue with Paola Balla

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Paola Balla (PB): Fiona, in 2019 Marina Tyquiengco wrote the essay 'Black Velvet: Aboriginal Womanhood in the Art of Fiona Foley', for the *Indigenous Feminisms in Settler Contexts* issue of the journal *Feminist Studies*. The essay focused on your contributions to the *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin.¹ In the essay, Marina stated that prior to the exhibition that you, Fiona, did not know how to spell the word 'feminism' and that your position as a woman came second to your position as an Australian Aboriginal. Marina goes on to talk about your contributions to the exhibition, which, while including images of women, reflected on racism against all Aboriginal peoples, as opposed to issues that are particular to Aboriginal women, such as the dramatically high rates of abuse and violence that Aboriginal people suffer. Marina writes:

In her statement, Foley used the phrase 'spell feminism' as a means of dismissing feminism as inapplicable to her work and life. Her statement in Brooklyn was an attempt to strategically distance herself from white Australian feminism, which she views as having a problematic and paternalistic history with respect to Aboriginal women.²

Fiona, could you please speak to why positioning as a Blackfulla comes before gender for you?

Fiona Foley (FF): I think everything backtracks to how I was brought up. At home, everything was really centred on race, not on gender. My mother brought up me and my siblings to be proud of our Badtjala culture. That was the epitome of who we were. I grew up in a mixed-race family; my father is non-Indigenous, but he embraced my mother's culture and spoke our Badtjala language at home. There was a strong sense of being proud of our culture. And I didn't understand feminism. I was never taught any aspect of feminism at art school. There were no Australian feminist artists that we were taught about in art history or in the academy. That was all unknown territory to me. So, if you don't know it, how can you relate to it?

The powerful *Global Feminisms* exhibition that I was included in also showed the work of three other Australian artists: Tracey Moffatt, Patricia Piccinini, and Kate Beynon. In *Global Feminisms* you saw, for example, women breastfeeding, menstrual blood, women bound with leather, murdered female bodies discarded in the landscape, women affected by war, women who had immigrated to other countries, and the list goes on. We don't talk about women in these terms in this country, in equivalent exhibitions. I see that as an indictment on this society.³ Everything sits on the surface. And if you have a questioning mind, then you wonder what's going on in Australian society, why can't we discuss these things in their totality? Why do we have to dumb everything down?

PB: Yes, there's reductionism and then there's flattening as well. By flattening, I mean that the fullness, diversity, and complexities of women's embodied experiences and perspectives are reduced or erased. So, the feminist representation seems flat, one dimensional, without the context of whose Country those works are produced, and the conditions of settler violence,

erasure, and displacement as the cultural, historical, and political context for feminist art and art-making in the colony.

For me, art is a way to make sense of the sexual and family violence I survived, which my mum and grandmother also survived, and which so many Black women in this country have survived under colonisation. When this violence is not spoken about, or is silenced, it becomes inexplicable. You embody it and you internalise it because there's no language to describe it. You don't see any depictions of such violence, so you bury it even further.

One of the reasons I love your work, Fiona, is because of what it allows me to feel and express, and to relate to and to communicate to others; it's not just the struggle, but it's the beauty and resistance and strength of how our bodies are represented in your work. In *Black Velvet*, the *Badtjala Woman* series,⁴ and the *Native blood* series (both 1994), for example, we see your body unequivocally, unapologetically Black and beautiful. In these works, you are also responding to the photograph of an ancestor woman, drawing connections between generations of Black women's bodies. Could you speak to these works—why you made them and how you see them now?

FF: My mother did a lot of research and found four very powerful images of Badtjala people in the John Oxley Library.⁵ She got beautiful black-and-white copies of those photographs made, and one of them showed my great-great grandfather, Caboonya. These photographs also depict a female identified as a Fraser Island woman. I remember seeing the photograph of this woman and thinking that the shape of her breasts resembled the shape of my breasts. For me that was a moment of recognition: my body looked a little bit like her body. Of course, her hair is different to mine and her skin colour is different, and her adornments are different to those in the time that I grew up, but I thought the simplicity of likeness of that Fraser Island woman was worth pursuing. I asked two different photographers to work with me to reposition the frame using my body: the first photographer was a male photographer, Greg Weight, and we did three images in total; the second photographer was Sandy Edwards, and we also did three images. The 1994 one photographed with Greg Weight is a signature work that keeps reappearing. People still want to use those images, which are currently being exhibited at the National Gallery of Singapore. As my career progresses, I find that my earlier work remains popular, but that institutions are less forward in engaging me in critical conversations about my new work.

PB: I'm forty-seven, turning forty-eight this year. I feel completely excluded by Australian art institutions. I make art on my own, predominantly, but also in consultation or collaboration with my mum, my daughter, my son, and in my grandmother's memories. I also am mentored in an informal way by Aboriginal women artists that I've been very fortunate to have in my life (namely, Vicki Couzens, Maree Clarke, and aunties of mine). I also work with cousins and tiddas I've grown up with, and we all check in with each other. Our work exists outside of the institution for the most part.

When I am invited by an institution to exhibit, I'm longing for the invitation to be ethical. I don't want to be the only one invited. I want my mum and aunties to come with me. But I know that curatorial practice is very selective. I feel like curators spend more time thinking about who they're choosing to work with than the work they want to see realised, or the Country and the community that it comes from and is generated by. I feel like I'm in a position where if I criticise

how curators work, my community and I will be even further excluded. There's no space to disagree.

FF: Yeah, exactly right. You're an outcast if you have a different opinion. I've been disagreeing with many things over a long period of time.

As you get older you start wondering what is my legacy going to be? In part, because historically women in my family don't live long. So, you think about what your legacy will be? And you realise state art institutions do not have very many holdings of your work.

The art world is not necessarily about the type of work that you're creating. For example, I've done work around the history of opium in Queensland and waves of colonial violence. The histories told through works such as *Hunted III* (2021), *Horror Has a Face* (2017), *Bone Boxes*, and *The Magna Carta Tree* (2021) are important in terms of how Aboriginal people were treated under *The Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*. Yet, this work is rarely collected.

I learned a lot by witnessing my mother focus on large-scale cultural projects, bringing them to fruition, and her engagement with politicians and bureaucratic staff. It's easy to write important cultural leaders out of the picture, and that's what I am trying to work against. That's why it was so important to have *Biting the Clouds: A Badtjala Perspective on the Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897* and *The Bogimbah Creek Mission: The First Aboriginal Experiment* published in 2020 and 2021,⁶ as they will circulate in some form to a wider audience outside of the art world.

People will have a different understanding of the history in Queensland after reading *Biting the Clouds*. But that doesn't mean that I can ever stop working as an artist. I am driven to keep creating because there's so much more that could be said.

The question for me is always: what do you want to communicate? And I realise that historically my forebearers didn't have the opportunities that I have through having an education. I have a voice. But it's a voice that has been restricted because there have been people who have actively worked against me at a number of levels. Therefore, I find opportunities wherever I can to talk about things that matter to me.

PB: It makes me wild to hear about any systemic exclusion of you and your practice. I am of a generation of younger Aboriginal women artists who look up to you and clearly understand the significance of your work.

I think the lack of engagement with your broader research and practice, including by emerging Indigenous curators, touches on something that I've noticed is becoming more and more common. In her recent book, *Another Day in the Colony*, Professor Chelsea Watego names the problematics of what she terms the 'Ambiguously Indigenous'.⁷ Watego states:

Beware the Indigenising moment of singular and senior appointments in white institutions; it is an illusion of progress working to disguise the ongoing colonial violence Blackfullas are being subject to ... and tragically it's working.⁸

Australian art institutions are perpetrators of the instrumentalisation of young Indigenous peoples, via curatorial appointments, to sustain colonial violence. Watego expands:

[It occurs] through the mentorship and capacity—and aspiration—building programs our young people are being indoctrinated into. It is the newly identifying Aborigine who is most susceptible to these programs because it is often the first ‘Indigenous space’ in which they get to do their identity work. Yet it is an Indigenous space that has been constructed by colonisers. You will find that the ontologically Indigenous don’t last long in these programs. They get kicked out or moved on for being too outspoken; that is, too Black.⁹

As Watego highlights, art institutions are established via violence and they have violent mechanisms. They recruit curators who may, from my viewpoint, operate independently from the local Aboriginal community. The institution wants to say, ‘we have a Black curator’. Meanwhile, community members are asking, ‘I’m sorry, who are they? Where did they come from? Because we don’t know them.’ They don’t have relationships with us or our community, so how can they curate at a state institution or a national one about our communities when we don’t have a relationship with them. Relationships take time, knowledge, and community work to form.

In distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s ‘Towards an Australian Indigenous Women’s Standpoint Theory’, she writes:

... interconnectedness is the basis of Indigenous sovereignty, which informs our standpoint as embodied socio-cultural and historically situated subjects of knowledge. This form of embodiment and episteme is incommensurate with feminist standpoint theory for a number of reasons ...¹⁰

I’m wondering, do you think that the young Indigenous curators are appointed under a white feminist paradigm? There are a lot of white women curators, and white men, in power in art institutions.

FF: I think white women can and do play a large role in elevating Aboriginal curator’s careers. Often there’s not any intellectual rigour or gravitas with new Aboriginal curators coming into leading curatorial positions in state institutions. Further, there’s no expectation that they’ll form collegial relationships with Aboriginal artists or see artists as a constituency that they’re working with and for. It would be remiss of me as an Indigenous artist not to voice these concerns.

PB: I think there is, at times, a quite coercive and mutually beneficial relationship happening between selected artists and the institutions. I can’t see how we can separate our politics from ourselves as Aboriginal artists and curators. Anyone privileged enough to have power and any sort of decision-making in these institutions has a responsibility back to the Black community.

In 2018, a curator at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) appropriated the title of a residency and exhibition project *Blak to the Future*, mounted by Footscray Community Arts Centre (FCAC).¹¹ It was curated by Rosie Kalina and Hannah Morphy-Walsh, led by a group of young

Indigenous artists, and mentored by me. The title came from a paper I presented at the public seminar series *Writing & Concepts*, held at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in 2017 (published in 2019).¹² The group of young artists who organised *Blak to the Future* asked if they could use my paper's title and I gave them permission to. However, without permission the NGV also used the title, and publicly announced it for a show of Aboriginal art set to open in November 2018. The NGV appropriated the title without consultation, permission, or acknowledgment of me or the *Blak to the Future* group, infringing on our intellectual cultural copyright. The NGV is less than seven kilometres from FCAC. We advertised the show *Blak to the Future* all over social media six months before the NGV used the title. FCAC has a very strong following and the arts community in Melbourne is small, so people know when things are blatantly copied. We, the young ones and I, went to the media, and FCAC assisted us in making the situation with the NGV public, with support from the National Association of the Visual Arts (NAVA) and ArtsHub, which published an article about it.¹³ It was only because of public pressure and me calling out the NGV publicly that I eventually got a private email from the NGV director.

The director apologised and said that they changed the title of the show. I pushed back and said this isn't just about an apology: you need to change your actions and behaviour. This could have been an opportunity, where instead of infringing intellectual property rights you could have invited the young Indigenous artists to mount their show as part of the NGV's *Blak to the Future* (later changed to *Black to the Future* and, finally, *From Bark to Neon: Indigenous Art from the NGV Collection*). The young people could have been invited to speak. They could have grown their capacity, their confidence through feeling welcome in the state gallery, which apparently represents our people. It really makes me think about how important Boomalli is and was, and why you, as one of the founding artists, had to create that space and what it means to you now and what it meant to you then.

FF: We had to create Boomalli because, in the 1980s, there were no art spaces showing urban-based artists. There was a Sydney-based company that had an Aboriginal artists gallery, originally in the Rocks and later it went to Kent Street in the CBD. It mostly showed work from Arnhem Land in central Australia. The ten founding members of Boomalli were Euphemia Bostock, Michael Riley (dec.), Tracey Moffatt, Jeffrey Samuels, Bronwyn Bancroft, Avril Quail, Fern Martens, Arone Meeks (dec.), Brenda L. Croft and I. We were largely going to art schools in Sydney, and we came together and had our first show in 1987, called *Boomalli Au Go Go*.¹⁴ We thought it would be really good to just keep going through inviting Indigenous artists to have shows at Meagher Street, Chippendale. At the same time, we also wanted to curate our own exhibitions and write about our own art, and also be involved in the academy, which was principally the University of Sydney through the Power Institute, on Aboriginal art. Some of that is documented. We were trying to really put urban Aboriginal art on the map in Sydney.

I was a curator at Boomalli for twelve months, and I also had an internship at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) between 1991 and 1992 (and in 1994–95). In 1991, I curated three exhibitions and in the first of these I exhibited three women together—Brenda L. Croft, Destiny Deacon, and Lisa Bellear—in a show titled *Kudjeris*;¹⁵ it was the first time Destiny had been in a show in Sydney. Boomalli was doing some groundbreaking work. It was an opportunity to profile artists outside of Sydney, including in a joint exhibition of South Australian artist Ian

Abdulla and New South Wales artist Harry Wedge, which also took place in 1991. The third show was the end-of-year group exhibition.

When I was working at the MCA, I co-curated two big exhibitions with Djon Mundine. One went to Cuba; it was called *Tyerabarrbowaryaou II: I Shall Never Become a White Man*,¹⁶ a phrase by Pemulwuy, meaning, as the subtitle says, I shall never become a white man. There were sixteen artists in the exhibition, which went to the fifth *Havana Biennial* (1994). I selected two artists to go across: Destiny Deacon and Ron Hurley (who has passed away). That time was really exciting—exciting times internationally, exciting events bringing people together, and getting to understand artists as individuals. The place was alive and just buzzing.

Some of us were also taking trips to remote communities. I was going to Maningrida and Ramingining; Michael Riley was doing some work in Ramingining; and Tracy Moffatt was commissioned to work in Maningrida. We were going between different Aboriginal communities and experiencing different ways of being in the world. There were a lot of opportunities opening up for these types of cultural crossovers, such as the big survey exhibition *Aratjara* (1993–94),¹⁷ which travelled internationally to three countries, and with Gary Foley as the head of the Aboriginal Arts Board (Australia Council) at that time, it was really groundbreaking international diplomacy. Today, I guess, we don't really draw upon people who were there in the beginning and have a historical understanding of how Aboriginal art was making inroads through deliberate choices to position it differently, outside of the Australian confines of primitive art.

Indigenous curator positions had to be fought for within institutions such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the MCA. Largely, Indigenous artists at Boomalli had to advocate for those positions to exist, for the right to have Indigenous curators in our major cultural institutions. Now it's much more accepted that you'll have one Indigenous person, usually a curator on staff, representing that aspect of the collection, and also curating Aboriginal exhibitions at a particular institution.

The 1980s was all pretty challenging, and I believe Boomalli was ahead of its time. It only came together because we were actively advocating and fighting for change. It wasn't just benevolence from the white art establishment that created an art movement; it was never going to happen if we didn't demand self-representation. So, we demanded it. Unfortunately, I don't think this art history is talked about or taught in a way that gives younger people an understanding of urban Aboriginal art as an art movement that was created by Aboriginal people living in Sydney.

PB: It makes me excited thinking about that time, and, in a sense, I know it visually through some of the documentation of those shows. I was very lucky to have seen some documentation of the Boomalli years in Lisa Bellea's photographic archive.¹⁸ Her images capture some of the exhibition openings but, almost even more importantly, just all of you being together.

As the photographs show, Boomalli was largely a movement of Black women and a phenomenon created through your collective sheer determination. What you did was unprecedented. Now, as you say, there's an expectation that there will be an Indigenous role at

state, national, and even smaller institutional levels. People don't really understand the history of Black arts in institutions.

FF: Yeah, there was no blueprint. Michael Riley had a meeting with Gary Foley, who was then head of the Aboriginal Arts Board. Jacqui Katona was a project officer there, and we got some funds. I don't know how Michael managed it, but we got some funds to rent this old, disused sewing factory in Chippendale and we set that space up to function with an office and gallery. There was no-one telling us what to do. We just created this place. We made it happen.

PB: I've been very fortunate over the years to know Gary Foley, as we work together at Moondani Balluk, Indigenous Academic Unit, Victoria University. More recently, Jacqui's been working with us at Vic Uni too. They are a formidable pair of thinkers and doers, academics and historians and activists. I've often heard Foley discuss his role at the Australia Council during his lectures for history subjects he teaches, and students are almost always really shocked because they don't see him as an arts person. They see him as the activist, and so we often say to students, we'll show you some episodes of *A Country Practice* that he was in.¹⁹ Gary talks about *A Country Practice* as a transformative piece of art because it reached so many people. In one episode, he insisted that the scriptwriters let him talk about land rights and health conditions for Blackfullas, which is brilliant because all these people across Australia, as well in the UK and some parts of Europe, were watching these shows so started to understand. It always blows me away hearing him recall that time. Like you said, the energy that it took to force change was enormous. You couldn't sit around and wait for it. You had to fight.

As a final question, Fiona: What do you think about Black art schools and the lack of them—in the major cities, let alone in regional remote areas?

FF: Well, Black art schools in the academy. I think they would be dynamic places.

PB: I recently saw on social media that, I think, the National Art School was getting someone to play the yidaki and do a smoking ceremony at the start of the academic year. I was looking at the socials, really bemused, thinking about the amount of performative and Black cladding that happens at the start of an academic year by a lot of these tertiary institutions. But where's the actual commitment? And where's the Black academic?

After I'd moved to Melbourne as an eighteen-year-old, to study for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne, I was failing terribly. I was homesick and mucking up, and I couldn't focus. It was very fortunate for me that Destiny Deacon was one of my teachers at the University of Melbourne. Later, Harding and Deacon also started teaching in RMIT University's Koori art and design course. I was so excited. On the first day I was like a kid surrounded by my idols. It was beautiful to be welcomed into an all-Black space. But after a while it folded. We haven't had a Black art school here in Naarm/Melbourne for a long time, and I'd love to see another one. We could have permanent Aboriginal academic artists and curators teach, and community and Elders come in. It's sorely needed, as when you go into the existing university system and art schools, we are understood through binaries: remote/urban, for example. The current education system doesn't hold the knowledge about how nuanced and diverse we are, and how we don't split ourselves like that.

At the Footscray Community Arts Centre, we are working to activate our community to, hopefully, finally, get our own space. It's been good being there but we really need an unequivocally, unapologetically Black-only space in order to think and cultivate the kind of politics that we are talking about; a space to really embolden our young people and help them move them away from developing a deliberately crafted position meant to signal some sort of individual success. For me it's not success to get singled in an institution when you're also isolated.

Notes

- ¹ *Global Feminisms*, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 23 March – 1 July 2007, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/global_feminisms.
- ² Marina Tyquiengco, 'Black Velvet: Aboriginal Womanhood in the Art of Fiona Foley', *Feminist Studies* 45, nos 2–3 (2019): 467–500, <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.45.2-3.0467>.
- ³ Jacqueline Millner, Catriona Moore, and Georgina Cole, 'Art and Feminism: Twenty-First Century Perspectives', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 15, no. 2 (2015): 143–49, DOI: 10.1080/14434318.2015.1089816.
- ⁴ Fiona Foley, *Badtjala Woman Series*, 1994, see <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/works/1995.101C>.
- ⁵ Marina Tyquiengco, 'Source to Subject: Fiona Foley's Evolving Use of Archives', *Genealogy* 4, no. 3 (2020): 76, <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy4030076>.
- ⁶ Fiona Foley, *Biting the Clouds: A Badtjala Perspective on The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2020); and Fiona Foley, *The Bogimbah Creek Mission: The First Aboriginal Experiment* ([Booral, Qld]: Pirri Productions, 2021). See also, <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/bogimbah-creek-mission-first-aboriginal-experiment-new-publication-dr-fiona-foley>.
- ⁷ Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2021), pp. 153–83.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- ¹⁰ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Towards an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory', *Australian Feminist Studies* 28, no. 78 (2013): 331–47, DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2013.876664.
- ¹¹ *Blak to the Future*, Roslyn Smorgon Gallery, Footscray Community Arts Centre, 14 May – 9 June 2018. Artists: Rosie Kalina, Hannah Morphy-Walsh, Savanna Kruger, Yasmin Harradine, Katen Balla, Charlotte Allingham, Pierra Van Sparkes and Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance (WAR).
- ¹² Paola Balla, 'Writing Blak to the Future: Situating the Ways Aboriginal Matriarchs Protect and Resist with Art and Story', in *Writing + Concepts 2017*, ed. Jan Van Schaik (Melbourne, Art + Australia Publishing, 2019), pp. 150–56. This text is about how Aboriginal women resist through story and storytelling.
- ¹³ Gina Fairly, 'What's in a Name? NGV Accused of Disrespect and Plagiarism', *ArtsHub*, 3 November 2018, <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/whats-in-a-name-ngv-accused-of-disrespect-and-plagiarism-256762-2361299>.
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Jones, *Boomalli: 20 Years On* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007). Published alongside the exhibition *Boomalli: 20 Years On*, at Australian Collection Focus Room, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 22 August – 28 October 2007, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/downloads/files/Boomalli_cat.pdf.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Tyerabarrbowaryaou II: I Shall Never Become a White Man*, fifth Havana Biennial, Cuba, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Artists: Ian Abdulla, Gordon Bennett, Destiny Deacon, Kevin Gilbert, Tommy McRae (Yackaduna), Marrnyula Munungurr, Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, Jimmy Wululu; and Utopia artists Audrey Kngwarreye, Lilly Kngwarreye, Lucky Kngwarreye, Hazel Kngwarreye, Katie Kngwarreye, Michelle Kngwarreye, <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/tyerabarrbowaryaou-ii>.

¹⁷ Gary Foley, Charles (Chicka) Dixon, Lin Onus, and Bernhard Lüthi, *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians: Traditional and Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Dusseldorf), Hayward Gallery (London), and the Louisiana Museum (Denmark), 1993–94. See also, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/3952/ich-bin-ein-aratjara-20-years-later> and <https://acca.melbourne/program/defining-moments-aratjara-art-of-the-first-australians-and-fluent>.

¹⁸ Lisa Belleair Photographic Archive, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, <https://korieheritagetrust.com.au/visit-us/collections/photography>.

¹⁹ Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), *Gary Foley and Di Smith on the Set of A Country Practice in Sydney*, <https://acmi.net.au/works/100812--gary-foley-and-di-smith-on-the-set-of-a-country-practice-in-sydney-1989>. See also, *Aboriginal History Archive (AHA)*, Victoria University, <https://www.vu.edu.au/about-vu/university-profile/moondani-balluk-indigenous-academic-unit/aboriginal-research-researchers/aboriginal-history-archive-aha>.