



Dilemmas of Emotional Empathy: Archie Moore's *A Home Away from Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)*

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Archie Moore
Home Away From Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut) 2016
Mixed-media installation
Installation view (2016) at Royal Botanic Garden Sydney for
the 20th Biennale of Sydney, curated by Stephanie Rosenthal.
This project was made possible with assistance from Neil Hobbs
and Karina Harris and Kevin O'Brien.
Photograph: Wendell Teodoro

Archie Moore's *A Home Away from Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)* 2016 was commissioned for the 20th Biennale of Sydney: *The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed*. Having ruminated on the themes formulated by the curator, Moore came up with a response to the commission that channelled his preoccupation with Australian Aboriginal experience and expressed the melancholy, non-declarative air of much of his work. One of the conceptual conceits of artistic director Stephanie Rosenthal was to rebadge the exhibition venues as fictional "embassies", which she cast as "safe spaces for thinking and conversation". According to Moore, embassies and diplomacy got him thinking about Wangal man Woollarawarre Bennelong, who mediated between Aboriginal peoples of the Sydney region and members of the First Fleet, particularly Arthur Phillip, first governor of the convict colony of New South Wales. The work Moore created, assisted by Indigenous architect Kevin O'Brien, recalled Bennelong's negotiation of two radically different cultures, while gesturing to the legacy of deprecation that colonisation has visited upon Australia's first peoples and their descendants.

In Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden—on a site now known as Bennelong Point but which the Gadigal custodians originally called Tubowgulle—Moore arranged for the construction of a full-scale replica of a small brick hut built in 1790, at Bennelong's request to Governor Phillip. Phillip had orders from home to "endeavour, by every means, to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all subjects to live in amity and kindness with them."¹ Ironically, the governor was compelled to carry out this task by authorising the abduction of Bennelong, then in his mid-twenties, and his companion Gadigal leader Colebee, from Manly Cove in late 1789. Colebee soon escaped, but Bennelong remained in the settlement for a time, learnt some English, and formed a close friendship with Phillip. Records indicate that Bennelong attended social events at Government House, mingling with Phillip, his officers, prominent colonists, and their families. The dwelling recognised Bennelong's services to the colony and was the first residence colonists ever built for an Indigenous person. Its exact location near Government House is unknown, but the dimensions and materials were recorded, and the replica is based on these.

Moore's reincarnation of Bennelong's European-style home away from Wangal lands (extending from what is now Goat Island along the south side of Parramatta River to Rosehill) amplified stark contrasts between different kinds of architectural presence and land use. Framing the reconstructed colonial residence, equipped with a chimney, door, and window, were the modernist sails of the Sydney Opera House, the vivid green of Bennelong Lawn, which has hosted countless wedding photographs in recent times, and the Gothic Revival residence of present-day governors of New South Wales. But the work invokes more than Bennelong's story. Embodying a kind of architectural time warp, the hut's interior was based on the artist's hazy, largely passed-down memories of the dirt-floored, corrugated-iron humpy that was home, in the 1970s, to his Indigenous grandmother, Vera Cleven. Vera lived in Glenmorgan, on the Queensland Darling Downs, west of Tara, the small rural town in which Moore was brought up, the son of an Aboriginal mother and a white father. Like many Aboriginal people of mixed heritage, Moore has lost touch with the language and culture of his ancestors, and this disconnection and his conflicted identity often informs his art.

Added to the artist's edited and sparsely furnished version of Vera's home were an industrial petrol drum for seating, which Moore recalls seeing relatives use for this purpose, and what he calls a "lousy little sixpence", glued to the windowsill. These elements recall the impoverished conditions in which his maternal grandmother lived. The temporal torsions of the work included the exterior of the convict-era hut looking oddly pristine and new, while Vera's late-twentieth-century scrap-iron dwelling appeared aged and run down. Moore insisted that the shell of the building look new,

stressing that this recall of Bennelong alongside Vera addresses our present, when inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians continue to bite.

Moore has created a number of interior spaces loosely derived from memories of his personal history. The current exhibition at Griffith University Art Museum dramatically extends this tributary of his practice. His 2010 installation *Dwelling* recreated rooms of his childhood home in Tara at Brisbane's Accidentally Annie Street Space, which occupies an old Queenslander. The furnishings included a battered couch decorated with violent cartoons redolent of male youth alienation, a threadbare carpet, and a black-and-white television. Other items were scattered about: broken toys, a nude postcard, and green spiral mosquito coils, the noxious fumes of which seem equally toxic to insects and humans. The pungent smell of disinfectant and a sound recording of the artist emanating from an old refrigerator, as though he were trapped inside, infiltrated this rendition of "a home away from home". The latter touch perhaps registers Moore's less than positive feelings towards Tara. Last year the artist fabricated another architectural interior, at the Fontanelle Gallery, Adelaide, for the 2017 Tarnanthi: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. Titled *Whipsaw*, this work also harked back to his grandmother's living circumstances. Here, the walls of a windowless room were clad in horizontal rows of rusted corrugated iron, enclosing a red-dirt floor. The sense of oppressive confinement was amplified by a vaporous atmosphere, created by a fog machine and a soundtrack of rain colliding with a tin roof, and crackling fire.

All of these works imply that certain built spaces may be invested with individual and collective memories, delivering insights into the lives of those who have inhabited them. A further premise of Moore's immersive, multisensory installations is that by physically experiencing such environments, even if reconstructed, we may imagine ourselves walking in the shoes of another, experiencing their pain and alienation as if it were our own. This mimetic assimilation of others' feelings is known as emotional empathy.

Commentators on Moore and his art have referred to empathy as a possible antidote to inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Steve Dow's interview with the artist in this catalogue opens with the question: How do we find empathy across cultural divides? In another interview, Moore speaks of his shared-experience installations, "as a comment on reconciliation and the uncertainty of non-white and white people ever understanding each other, or even having a sense of empathy for one another."² Moore's remarks seem to oscillate between longing for mutual empathy across racial divides and, as he states in conversation with Dow, a sense of "the impossibility of having a shared experience with another—that two people or groups can never fully understand one another."

Moore's reservation about easily achieved empathy for those whose experiences and beliefs are very different to our own demands consideration. In a recent essay on claims of virtual reality as "the ultimate empathy machine", Alyssa K. Loh questions the current doxa that enveloping viewers within perfect 360-degree simulations of refugee camps, or bombings in the Middle East, offers the high road to empathic identification with the suffering of strangers, amplifying moral and political awareness.³ Loh observes that for those who espouse such views, the test for empathic efficiency resides in the level of visceral emotion felt by viewers.⁴ She reminds us, however, that empathy is not simply a matter of *feeling* as others have or do, or putting ourselves in their place; rather, it requires the difficult and at times confronting interpretive work of trying to understand other minds. This entails drawing on our own memories and experiences, and imaginatively expanding these to appreciate an inner life that is perhaps vastly different from our own. According to Loh, "When we dispense with empathy's cognitive exigencies, we are left only with its emotional vibrations."⁵

I wonder, therefore, whether experiencing the sights and sounds of a physical environment on its own facilitates connection with the inner life of an Australian Indigenous person? or other socially marginalised individuals or groups? Based on my encounter with *A Home Away from Home (Bennelong/Vera's Hut)*, I'm not so sure. What strikes me about Moore's racially freighted environments is how much their significance and effect require the addition of stories—stories both personal and historical. These narratives are circulated in interviews with the artist, information supplied by galleries, and other forms of art commentary. When storytelling becomes part of the mix, we shift from the realm of perceptual reflex triggered by a sensorial environment to a more distanced, durational pathway into the psychology and experience of others. And being a savvy student of film and the role of language in identity formation, Moore is well aware that stories once thought of as embedded in truth may be undone or revised over time.

One of the protagonists of *A Home Away from Home* is a relatively well-known figure of Australian colonial history, whose life has been profusely recounted in contexts ranging across children's books, songs, plays, novels, education kits on the Internet, and academic histories of Australia. For some, Bennelong symbolises collusion with the English invaders; for others he represents the unfinished business of reconciliation. More recently, historians have argued that Bennelong's life has for many decades been almost uniformly chronicled as a tale of tragic failure.⁶ He is cast as catastrophically caught in a void between two irreconcilable cultures. The common story is that having voluntarily spent just over two years in England, at the behest of Phillip, he returned in 1795 and died broken and alcohol addicted in 1813, rejected by his own people and disdained by the colonisers.⁷ Art world responses to Moore's biennale installation duplicated this image of Bennelong as ultimately a victim of cross-cultural contact.

There is insufficient space here to detail recent revised histories of Bennelong's life published in a 2009 issue of the journal *Aboriginal History*. Suffice to say, each of the authors discovered or reinterpreted a range of historical records to question the trope of tragedy that has persistently contoured public understanding of the man. Keith Vincent Smith convincingly argues:

[Bennelong] did not fade into obscurity in the second part of his life after his return from England in 1795. He resumed a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle, regained authority as a leader, remarried and had a son. He died at the age of 50 as a respected elder mourned by his people.⁸

In her exhaustive survey of how Australian historiography and popular culture has apprehended Bennelong, Emma Dortins contends: "Too many of Bennelong's tragedies allow the concerned conscience to confuse tragedy with 'inevitable misfortune', as it had been in the nineteenth-century tragedies of Aboriginal extinction, handing out easy absolution to its audience."⁹

I do not mention these revisionist histories to substitute previous truths for new ones, but rather to stress that for me one of the gifts of Moore's *A Home Away from Home* was to stir my curiosity to investigate Bennelong's story in greater depth. I discovered a more complex person than the tragic failure of popular imagination: one who played political hardball both within his own culture and among the early settlers. Sometimes he was successful, at other times not so much.

My reaction to the work echoes one of Moore's hopes for its effect. In a radio interview conducted at the time of its unveiling he expresses the wish that visitors to the hut might read the didactic label attached to the building and want to learn more about Bennelong.¹⁰ This is another example of how the physical environments Moore creates call for narrative supplements to flesh them out. Generally speaking, however, Moore is not a fan of elaborate discursive explanations



installed in situ with his works, preferring instead to orchestrate more understated and indirect allusions to political content. What critic Timothy Morrell describes as the introverted nature of his practice invites not so much a gut reaction as taking the time to dig deep to access the significance of his works.¹¹

One aspect of Bennelong's story signalled obliquely by *A Home Away from Home* is a musical component that plays softly around the hut's interior as one stands looking through the open door towards the dazzling white shells of the Opera House. The haunting refrain, accompanied by clapsticks, records a performance by Indigenous musician Matthew Doyle of "Bennelong's Song", which accompanied the Welcome to Country ceremony at the site on 16 March 2016. Doyle explains that Bennelong performed the song in 1793 in England, and it was recorded in musical notation, enabling its revival in recent years. Bennelong likely sang to a British audience, with his young cousin Yemmerawanne, who accompanied him to London and died there of illness in 1794. According to Doyle, the song imparts a powerful sense of homesickness, telling of the men's lives hunting and fishing on the other side of the world and of their families and loved ones. Doyle's poignant rendition of "Bennelong's Song" certainly conveys a strong impression of distance and longing.

Of course, Bennelong is not the only Aboriginal protagonist whose spirit is summoned by *A Home Away from Home*. Vera Cleven is not a known public figure as Bennelong is, and her artist grandson seems not to have much direct contact with her. My response to the reconstruction of Vera's humpy was rather different to my response to Moore's tribute to the Wangal man. Upon entering the dwelling's makeshift interior of rust-stained corrugated iron I was overwhelmed by a memory from my childhood that has never left me.

Between 1962 and 1966 my family lived in the country town of Narrandera, in western New South Wales, which I now know was established on the lands of the Wiradjuri people. My father was deputy headmaster at the local high school, and we lived in a comfortable Federation house courtesy of the New South Wales Department of Education. One of the strongest memories from my early primary-school years was the route the school bus took each day. It included a detour through the local tip to pick up Aboriginal children who lived there in shanties made of battered corrugated iron and other discarded materials. I also recall white children on the bus, especially boys, heckling the inhabitants as they entered and departed the vehicle, with the recipients of this jeering sometimes giving as good as they got. My mother tells me that the Aboriginal settlement was located on the western fringe of town, and I now realise that this scenario occurred throughout Australia, with Aboriginal families compelled to inhabit the least desirable real estate of country towns. But at the age of eight or nine I knew none of this. No Aboriginal history was taught at my primary school and Aboriginal children were not among my circle of friends. But the tenacity of this memory of people living in circumstances so different from my own attests to its impact at the time. I cannot recall the sentiments I felt then, but I doubt they involved a capacity to imagine myself in the shoes of those Aboriginal children. The best I can imagine is that I experienced a jolting recognition that not everyone in my hometown lived or was treated in the same way.

In the late 1990s, I was one of Archie Moore's teachers in visual art at Queensland University of Technology. Two decades later I find myself filled with admiration for his moving, thoughtful and thought-provoking meditations on barriers to and small advancements in greater understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.



¹ Cited in Keith Vincent Smith, "Bennelong Among His People," *Aboriginal History* 33 (2009), 11.

² "Archie Moore in Conversation with Wes Hill," *Eyeline: Contemporary Visual Arts*, no. 82 (2015): 31.

³ Alyssa K. Loh, "I Feel You," *Artforum* 56, no. 3 (2017): 207-13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶ Kate Fullagar, "Woollarawarre Bennelong: Rethinking a Tragic Narrative," *Aboriginal History* 33 (2009): 3-6.

⁷ Emma Dortins, "The Many Truths of Bennelong's Tragedy," *Aboriginal History* 33 (2009): 53.

⁸ Smith, "Bennelong," 7.

⁹ Dortins, "The Many Truths," 68-69.

¹⁰ Interview with Daniel Browning, "A Home Away from Home," *AWAYE!* ABC Radio National, 26 March 2016, www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/2016-03-26/7266568.

¹¹ Timothy Morrell, "Archie Moore: Drilling Deep," *Artlink* 32, no. 2 (2012): 98.

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