

PANEL 1: CHALLENGING CONCEPTS OF NATURE

Custodians, country, corroborees and collectors in a settler colony through a decolonising prism

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This paper begins with two transcultural events in the Swan River settler colony of Western Australia in the early 1830s when Minang people of King George Sound (Albany) performed corroborees for visiting natural scientists, Baron Karl von Huegel and Charles Darwin. These men were collecting specimens from Minang lands that were destined for botanical collections, science and commercial gain in Britain and Europe. I analyse these corroborees as performances of Minang cultural agency and opposition to the collectors' uninvited intrusion into Minang lands and exploitation of their natural resources. In this way I seek to decentre heroic narratives of collectors, scientists and collections still celebrated in exhibitions and publications today. Noongar people and collaborators are now working to reinstate recognition of their knowledge and practices in caring for country. In a new project at Curtin University we are asking questions about how working with the surviving historical botanical collections and their holding institutions in Europe might contribute. The urgent task is to staunch the destruction of the region's rich biological diversity now seriously endangered by nearly 200 years of colonial exploitation and mismanagement that can be traced from the colonial cultural values and practices of the early botanical collecting projects to the present.

Bio

Anna Haebich is a multi-award winning scholar known for her innovative cross-cultural approaches to research. Her work addresses histories of Aboriginal peoples and ethnic minorities and visual, material and performance cultures. Anna is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences and the Australian Academy of Humanities. She is currently a John Curtin Distinguished Professor at Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia. Anna's current projects include a Cultural history of Noongar performing arts; Oral histories of Carrolup Aboriginal child artists; Ancestors words - a history of Noongar letter writing in the archive 1860-1960; and Strategies for decolonizing colonial botanical collections. Anna's partner is Darryl Kickett, Noongar Nation Elder.