

‘The Comfort Zone’s the Enemy of the Spirit, Jack!’: An interview
with Uncle Jimmy Smith

‘The Comfort Zone’s the Enemy of the Spirit, Jack!’: An interview with Uncle Jimmy Smith

Uncle Jimmy Smith, Andrew Brooks, and Astrid Lorange

November 2019

The walking tour with Uncle Jimmy Smith was scheduled as the first event of the *Infrastructural Inequalities* public program on Saturday 6 October 2018. Prior to Saturday it had been raining pretty hard. We kept checking the weather app and peering anxiously at the clouds. We texted with Uncle Jimmy. ‘Let’s stay in touch’, we said, ‘and hope for clear skies’. In the morning it was bucketing down but we remained optimistic: the app promised relief. Uncle Jimmy, on the other hand, was skeptical (his early morning reply to our optimism: ‘what city are you in?’). But we gathered out the front of Artspace anyway, a constellation of umbrellas and raincoats. And as we waited and chatted, the sun appeared. It was perfectly timed. As the sun came out, so too did Uncle Jimmy’s incredible generosity and warmth.

We’d asked Uncle Jimmy to lead a tour of the area local to Artspace – the spectacular country that leans out into the harbour. One side is now called Woolloomooloo, with its perverse mix of naval ships and luxury wharfside apartments; the other side is the site of the Sydney Opera House and its attendant spectacles. We wanted to take the *Infrastructural Inequalities* event outside, to move across space and through time, to think about how this inner plug of the harbour – a site central to the massive infrastructural project of settlement – is also a site of enduring knowledge, active resistance, and contested histories. In short, we wanted to think about how we could begin the conversation about infrastructural inequalities by first thinking about invasion and settlement.

Months afterwards, we asked Uncle Jimmy to sit down with us and reflect on the walking tour and his practice as an educator. We met him on a freezing cold day in June 2019. The three of us sat in a little plaza in Glebe until the rain returned. In this short piece, we excerpt from that interview.

‘The Comfort Zone’s the Enemy of the Spirit, Jack!’: An interview with Uncle Jimmy Smith

Uncle Jimmy Smith is a Wiradjuri man from Erambie, in central-west New South Wales. A dedicated educator, he has been teaching people about First Nations infrastructure, science, culture, land management, art, and politics for over three decades. ‘Spirit brought me into it . . . and it’s part of my journey’, he replied when we asked how he came to be doing this work. For Uncle Jimmy, the sense of being directed by the spirits to do this work is tangible, pushing him to continue despite exhaustion and leading him to work with various institutions – such as schools and museums – with deep colonial ties.

When I talk about spirit directing the whole thing – you know, there’s I don’t know how many deceased First Nations people there are across the country. But the people who are significant in that, who were wiped out, they work for the good of the country. They’re working for the good of the First Nations people as well. And that’s how they brought me back here [to Sydney] from Brisbane – I was in Brisbane for 18 years. When I came back, you know, I’d been teaching all ‘round Brisbane, and when I came back I went to Bondi Public School and worked. And they said ‘Come back on Sorry Day’. So I come back on Sorry Day and they’d had all this work done, with the kids, they had all this text on a big flatscreen, and all throughout the text it was ‘Mr Smith this’ and ‘Mr Smith that’. And you know, it was just overwhelming, and then I realised, it was the spirits here. They were welcoming me back through the children who I’d been teaching for that period of time. And I’m still teaching them. So it was absolutely overwhelming, I’ll tell you what, I had to walk out of the room, otherwise I would’ve started bawling in front of a room full of kids and teachers! Yeah, it was unbelievable. Because they didn’t get the full impact of why I was there. But the spirit was working through the school, they were welcoming me back . . . [A]ll those spirits, who are still here, that they’re working for the good of, first of all, the preservation of the land, [but also] to share culture, create understanding, and do it through education. And bring people through, just like the walking tour I did with you guys.

On the day of the walking tour we set off on foot, past the luxury catamarans and super yachts moored at Finger Wharf and up into Yurong Point. As we strolled with Uncle Jimmy – across the wharf, around the scalloped edges of the harbour, up and down the sandstone steps, in and out of crowds, over a hill, under trees, and back down past the neoclassical oddity of the Art Gallery of

'The Comfort Zone's the Enemy of the Spirit, Jack!': An interview with Uncle Jimmy Smith

New South Wales – we listened. Uncle Jimmy spoke about land and place; about plants, fruits, and flowers; about weather and climate change; about fishing and food; about medicine and practices of caring and healing; about the relationship between colonialism and capitalism and the processes of dispossession, expropriation, extraction, and racialisation at the heart of that relationship; about astrology, energy, and spirit.

In the interview, we asked Uncle Jimmy about the walking tour as a form, the importance of doing pedagogy outside, and embodied forms of knowledge.

The classroom is outdoors. Always has been. And that's a big part of what I try to get across with all those kinds of things, with touching and feeling and smelling. . . . Hands on, ay. And smelling. You know? And the smell of the Eucalypts, and everything else. It becomes – it's that much more real. . . Speaking and talking, it's a great thing, but hands on feeling and smelling and seeing brings all the senses into play. Whereas sitting down in a classroom is not necessarily that way. And that's why some people go to sleep in classrooms!

Turning more explicitly to questions of infrastructure, we asked Uncle Jimmy about the infrastructure that came before and that followed invasion and settlement in the area; about how settlement both appropriates and denies Indigenous knowledge and practices.

Parramatta Road has always been there. City Road has always been there. Pacific Highway, north and south, Oxford Street – always been there. Old South Head Road. All these major arterials around the city have always been there. And then they have pathways going off those roads down to the water. So it's already here. And the colonial just built – expanded them. And they're still expanding them . . . First Nations people give. Colonisers take. What a paradox of the world and what they're destroying.

As Patrick Wolfe (2006) writes, 'invasion is a structure, not an event' (388). The appropriation of Indigenous land and knowledge is ongoing in the settler colony of Australia – settlement is a project that must continuously re-make itself in order to affirm 'the white possessive' logic (to borrow Aileen Moreton-Robinson's [2015] formulation). This, too, is something Uncle Jimmy is acutely

‘The Comfort Zone’s the Enemy of the Spirit, Jack!’: An interview
with Uncle Jimmy Smith

aware of, and he talked about the way the ‘mining boom’ in Australia had produced a particular kind of entitlement – a right to comfort – that relies on the negation of Indigenous sovereignty and a logic of unfettered growth.

I put it out there a couple of days ago how mining is destroying the country. And it didn’t really come into being in a big way until Howard and the Coalition got into government. And then since then it hasn’t stopped. It’s going full steam ahead now, and there’s still people out there fighting tooth and nail against it. And rightly so, you know, they’re the heroes. They are, they’re the people who will stand up. And they deserve recognition instead of being assaulted and gaoled and charged . . . And someone said everything that mining has done is give us all the comforts. The comfort zone’s the enemy of the spirit, Jack! Get a grip on yourself! While you want to sit on the bottom of the mountain, people want to have a go, climb the mountain. Talk about missed the boat!

Mining exemplifies the interrelationship of colonialism and capitalism – it brings into stark relief the unresolvable tension between Indigenous and colonial sovereignties. In this sense, sovereignty refers to legal frameworks for allocating ownership and engaging with land. If the possession of territory is always driving the settler-colonial project, it does so insomuch as it allows for the accrual of capital and the ownership of infrastructure. This relation between capitalism and colonialism was ever-present in Uncle Jimmy’s teachings in both the walking tour and the interview. At one point, he spoke about entitlement and possessiveness as everyday manifestations of a colonial-capitalist mindset and teaching as one method to challenge these structures:

But money’s a mental health issue . . . And I teach in early childhood and I teach about a story, in storytelling. About a frog called Bulma who drank all the water. And all the other animals didn’t have any water. Because one, big, fat frog drunk it all! And he was rude, and all he did was burp when the animals spoke to him. When I finish the story, I tell them, you know, the moral of this story, children, is that you should never ever grow up to be greedy or selfish because there are other people, just like the other animals, and they will go without.

'The Comfort Zone's the Enemy of the Spirit, Jack!': An interview with Uncle Jimmy Smith

At the end of our discussion, we asked Uncle Jimmy what decolonisation means to him. He took a deep breath, smiled, and replied with absolute clarity: 'First of all you go for the school system. And that's what I'm doing in my teaching . . . like coming here today, you know - I am born to do this. So I have to do it.' Joking about his friends from high school hassling him for being opinionated on Facebook, he laughed, 'Jesus, at this stage of my life I better have some bloody opinions!' 'And just as important', he continued, 'I should be living these opinions as well. . . And sharing them with as many people as I can. And I do.'

Works Cited

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.' *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8 (4): 387—409.