

# PREFACE

## Agatha Gothe-Snape

Sitting in the Powerhouse Research Library in Ultimo, I viewed an 1882 lithograph, *The Burning of The Garden Palace*, documenting the fire that led to the founding of the first of the museum's precursor institutions. That image, with its yellow skies and plumes of smoke engulfing the city, gave me a jolt. It was early 2020, at the end of Australia's most horrendous bushfire season on record. For months there had been an acrid choke of ash in the air as we breathed in destruction and loss.

Over the coming months, as an embedded artist at Powerhouse, I pulled on the threads of the museum's past endeavours in economic botany—particularly the industrial and economic uses of the eucalypt, which involved the extraction of trees to harvest timber, oil and other resources. I handled small pieces of blue gum, carefully labelled in cursive script, gathered by staff collectors. I pored over shimmering glass vessels of eucalypt oil, varying in colour from citrine to burnt umber. I walked amongst the grid of lemon-scented gums at the former Castle Hill Experimental Research Plantation. I encountered countless teacups, vases and stained-glass windows all adorned with images of gum blossoms, metalwork holding the shape of curving leaves, and decorative frames of carved eucalypt. The image of the eucalypt was now inextricably linked to my understanding of the museum.

Thinking critically about the role cultural institutions play in processes of colonial science challenged my own relationship with the Australian bush and its ubiquitous gum trees. On a deeply personal level, this evoked a revisiting and reimagining of childhood memories from the 1994 bushfires that decimated the beloved home my parents had built in the bush, with turpentine beams salvaged from the former Ultimo wool stores, where May Gibbs' gumnut babies had populated my imagination.

Reflecting on this loss, and on these three seemingly disconnected fires—all moments of cataclysmic destruction and erasure—their connections became apparent. How my own childhood was wrapped up in a romanticised cultural narrative of the bush inseparable from nation-building. And that climate change-driven bushfires of this century are contingent upon the colonial exploits of the previous two. So the starting point for *Eucalyptusdom* was this problem of how to hold two discordant truths—complicity in the exploitation of the eucalypt and a heartfelt love for the species. Is it possible to separate the love we feel from how and why that love has been constructed?

Sitting with these questions brought a deeper understanding of how I am continuously implicated in the story of nation-building. My very imagining, sense of identity and place are products of the process of colonisation. But, if I can be reflective and reflexive, I might learn to renegotiate the terms of those relationships and come to a more integrated sense of belonging.

*Eucalyptusdom* evidences the past practices of the museum, while concurrently inviting the refraction and disruption of a singular colonial story. By opening up to polyphonic voices and embracing discord we sought to begin renegotiating the terms of our relationship with the eucalypt. We continue to be reliant on the martyrdom of eucalypts, being consumers of their extracted resources, such as timber, oil and paper. This brings an urgent responsibility to these majestic yet vulnerable ecologies that are holders of timeless wisdom and vital culture. We must grapple with that as we strengthen our relationship with them as living entities—entangled with our childhoods, our sense of place, of being here, of home.