

# Chapter 8

## Reversing the gaze: Considering Indigenous perspectives on museums, cultural representation and the equivocal digital remnant

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**Abstract:** *Partnerships between museums and Indigenous communities have a complex and fraught history. At the centre of these relationships are often questions around agency and intent, and an increasing expectation of privileging the Indigenous voice. Effective partnerships can provide a lens for the literal and figurative repositioning of the Indigenous voice in the museum space, and this lens is refocused to determine the capacity of these spaces to provide a platform for Indigenous representation.*

*This chapter poses questions around museum and collections process and tools that support Indigenous agency as we move from object-focused display to social history-imbued stories in museum representation. It also asks some broader questions around the ownership of both the physical remnants of our cultures, and the potentially shifting and amorphous ownership issues around the digital, relocated and repositioned voice of our peoples in the national museum space.*

In 2008, following extensive consultation and collaboration with major national museum and gallery agencies, the *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries* was released (National Standards Taskforce 2008). In recent years several other key documents on museum practice have provided guidelines for engagement with Indigenous communities, the acquisition and management of Indigenous cultural materials, and the related protocols of practice surrounding the presentation of materials in the museum space. These guidelines are often combined with, or include, a focus on the emerging role of digitisation and new media forms in these spaces of representation.

## Information technology and Indigenous communities

A desire to facilitate a reversal of the gaze, by encouraging and empowering Indigenous people/s and communities to participate in the active management of their cultural representation, is often framed as an aspiration of the museum space. In addition to exploring potential outcomes for this power shift and these new relationships, this chapter ponders how prepared the mainstream museum space is in actively engaging with these communities and in acting as a partner in the process of Indigenous representation.

The changing role of the 'new' museum as a museum of engagement and interaction, combined with the emergence of new media and digital representations, has presented particular problems in the representation of Indigenous communities and culture, and has raised a number of key questions. Can a remnant appropriately represent culture? Who owns the digital remnant? Who controls its use? Is it more appropriately displayed from and within a community, but accessible to the broader museum space? Will there be an ownership struggle over the de-accession of digital remnants when they are all that the museum space holds that represents a community or a culture? These key questions have become an even more complex issue due, in part, to the increased capacity of digital materials to be made available in a multitude of online and real-space forms, removed, rehoused, reinterpreted and refashioned in the realm of the museum, seemingly without a clear set of national guidelines that provide protection in their 'removal' from their community of meaning.

Museums in Australia and around the world are beginning to engage with new media to represent Indigenous cultural materials and stories in multiple digital forms through the virtual space of the web, and through interactive and new media forms within the physical or real-space of the museum. New media solutions can be used to deliver more appropriate approaches to representation, for example, by avoiding the relocation of sacred or community-based resources and instead providing a digital record of these objects represented in video, audio and image forms. These forms also improve the representation by literally delivering the voice of that community. Their portability also offers a strategy to deliver the material back to that community, either through online forms or through the reproduction of digital exhibitions outside of the physical museum. This has been demonstrated well by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, which maintains a vibrant program of co-operation with Native communities and museums managed within those communities and an engagement through reciprocal programs and training systems for Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas (NMAI Collections 2009).

At a time when there remain fractured relationships informed by the highly sensitive debates around the de-accessioning of human remains and sacred materials from collections and, in particular, the resultant return of ancestral remains, carefully managing future relationships between museums and communities is key to avoiding some of the policy decisions that positioned ethnographic museums as authorities over collections. A clearer understanding of what UNESCO has framed as 'intangible

heritage' items, which, through digital remnants may be positioned and owned within a collection, will require a more even legal and power position for Indigenous peoples. If guidelines are required to facilitate a better understanding of how digital materials will be managed, a meaningful articulation can be found in Terri Janke's (2009) *Beyond Guarding Ground*, a text that explores the multiplicity of Indigenous cultural ownership protocols and issues beyond what has been traditionally accepted as ownership and location in the museum collection. The text promotes a position that digital materials are likely to be the mechanism of delivery from community to the broader population in the dissemination of performance, vocalisation, interaction in-country and other cultural Indigenous knowledges, and that communities retain a right over the iterations of this cultural material (Janke 2009).

The problem of collections and ownership becomes key in understanding who owns the remnant, and who creates a space of cultural management. Historically, that problem was moot as standard policies and practices of museums combined with property and ownership law held the museum as owner of a collection purchased or gifted to it. At a recent conference in the United States, a curator presented a photographic collection that his non-Indigenous institution held. The collection held a number of unique photographs of an Indigenous community at the end of the nineteenth century. He explained the positive steps in allowing contemporary Indigenous community access to the photographic materials in digital form. He was asked whether the community had requested these images to be returned and no longer used in the collection. He responded by explaining that his institution owned the images, and had the legal rights to show and distribute them according to their own collection policies and United States law. What rights do Indigenous communities have to request compliance where ownership of artefacts and objects of collection remain incontestable in law? What is the capacity or likelihood of a museum to entirely de-accession items to the extent that they no longer form a collection? With the capacious volume and reproductive potential of the digital image across more accessible media forms than the museum space, this will prove an even greater issue for both Indigenous communities and the museum.

In using the template of Edward Said's 'reversal of the gaze' as a means of 'strategic location' and repositioning of Indigenous identity as a central author in the process of review (Said 1979:20), I am beginning a longer-term study (supported by the Australian Research Council) into Indigenous representation through new media forms in national museum spaces. Central to the 'location' of the study is my own identity as an Indigenous Australian Wiradjuri community member and a worker in the field of cultural engagement. While this is a potentially risky and problematic position, as it locates me as a singular voice within the research, it is a cogent position in that it is frequently required by museums of their Indigenous curators. The role that Indigenous curators and consultants have in acting on behalf of the museum, as well as

giving voice to a community remote from the museum, is often layered with their roles in the broader, pan-Indigenous community, and sometimes by their disconnections.

The 'King Plate' was a colonial tool developed to inscribe individuals with a voice where none was necessarily authorised by their community. Those recipients of King Plates and their role in the post-colonial Indigenous collection act as a strong reminder of the risk involved when advocating as an Indigenous representative on behalf of a non-Indigenous organisation (Foley 2007) or when speaking globally on behalf of Indigenous peoples. The capacity for the Indigenous curator to avoid the difficult position of having a notional King Plate placed on his or her engagement in this dual role is a key issue to be explored further in this study and a key consideration in any reversal of the gaze that focuses on institutions as arbiters and authorisers of culture. To this end, the aim of attempting active reflexivity in the management of the study is to both challenge the notions of removed appraisal and, similarly, to encourage a further discussion around the capacity for any one Indigenous writer or researcher to respond in a pan-Indigenous manner.

As the Indigenous curator Djon Mundine suggests in his insightful 2005 *Artlink* article 'White face, BLAK mask [Apologies to Franz Fanon]', if the position is largely one where museums are forced to consider the broader visitor profile and the museum institution as vested interest, rather than the community being represented, then engagement will only truly be restored by eliciting the voices of Indigenous participants and practitioners. Mundine speaks of the difficulty in challenging the non-Indigenous voice that seeks to represent the Indigenous perspective, and suggests instead a voice and an approach that positions indigeneity at the centre of the engagement process.

By reversing the gaze and exploring these power relationships from an Indigenous perspective, there also emerges a third sphere of interactive space between the museum and the community. There is potential in this space to engage a meaningful dialogue around existing collections and materials, as has already been attempted through two contemporary spaces for online collections management: eMob and Ara Irititja.

eMob is an Aboriginal-developed online database that uses cultural annotation to contribute community knowledge to the provenance of Aboriginal materials held in foreign museum collections, and reveals the scope of the materials held to the participating Indigenous communities. (eMob 2009) As an Indigenous Australian-centred process that has sought out British collections, this project has been developed under the auspices of the collective Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations in south-east Australia with Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners working from outside these museum spaces. Through digital inscription of facsimiles of real-space objects, the artefacts are digitally relocated to their home communities, where further knowledge on the items' use and protocols of access may be ascribed. This process not only puts the power over the knowledge of the item back with the traditional owners, but enriches the collections of the museum by building knowledge around the collection and providing a resonance for further information on traditional

materials. It is significant that eMob has been able to provide a clear direction for the partnerships of this digital space, acknowledging all partners while understanding that the cultural information is likely to be enriched by the object's digital relocation back to community.

Ara Irititja, developed by the Pitjantjatjara Council, further explores the capacity for a community to remove material back into its own collection and to inscribe it and make it available in a manner appropriate to the materials and the community expectations (Ara Irititja Project n.d.). This project, developed with the South Australian Museum yet controlled and enriched by the community, has developed its own software that not only addresses the needs of annotation of the range of video, image and sound materials required by the representative material, but also allows different levels of access that is managed culturally.

The focus on both virtual spaces and technology-based new media outcomes evidenced by eMob and Ara Irititja also solves some of the key problems in re-assigning an Indigenous authorship over collections to a community, particularly where that group is geographically remote or located far from the museum space and collections. The capacity for technology to be reproduced, issues around insurance and portability, and the capacity for exhibitions to be housed in substantially different spaces are some of the potential benefits of engaging new media *in situ* forms. It does, however, remain to be seen if these preliminary strategies for the development of more reflexive inclusion and engagement that rely wholly on virtual strategies of viewing will be seen as inferior or simply as a different management tool.

Similarly, if the role of the national museum space is to position the ongoing relevance of Indigenous representation to the broader public, what role do these processes play in encouraging Indigenous people and communities to participate at the centre of the process without an adjustment to the goals of the museum space, or is this adjustment necessary and a core part of any agreement protocol?

These issues of adaptability to either the virtual or real-space negotiation are highlighted in recent scholarship on the role of digital media in Indigenous curatorship and the public archive that provides a lens on aspects of digitisation, navigation, ownership, and the need for reinforcement of policy and procedural requirements. This management of the viewer is reflected in the thoughtful work of Srinivasan and Huang's (2005) 'Fluid ontologies for digital museums', where they suggest that digital reiterations of physical resources may not be as simple as recreating the visual landscape of a gallery in a virtual context, while the appropriately many-authored *Indigenous Digital Collections* (Nakata et al. 2008) is a clear call to Australian archives to harvest materials appropriately. The complex issues of collection, ownership and rights management, and the specific issue of digitisation of culture and its management into the archive, posit a complex and potentially confronting situation for the museum space, which suggests that the requirements of the community may be more important than the policies of the archive, and that the importance of digitisation for Indigenous

communities is so present that it should take priority. These disparate commentaries on the digital space that community curatorship and the virtual museum may reveal have been explored in Richard Robins' (2008) 'Reflections in a cracked mirror', which highlights concerns for the way that Indigenous communities are displayed, managed into archives and made available in perpetuity. He poses the question of how a mainstream museum space can be utilised as a tool of cultural understanding by loading it with the purpose of developing a more reflexive museum practice. Are community members and Elders treated as curatorial experts, and what role does the museum curator have in acting as an interlocutor between the two parties? Underpinning these discussions and these specific questions is the question often invoked in the policy documents surrounding Indigenous engagement of the role of the museum space in assisting communities in 'managing' or even 'safeguarding' their cultural materials.

In addition to contributing to the education of locally employed Indigenous curators, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), led by a Native American director Kevin Gover, has contributed to the discussion of the power relationship and the role of community as equal partner by radically changing its way of managing and displaying its collection. The management cites the change in focus from static, historical collections to vigorous engagement processes and interactive programs by reminding the visitor that with 'continuing ambivalence about archaeology, there is little expectation for substantial growth of the archaeological collections' (NMAI n.d.). The NMAI charter to 'provide for Native American research and study programs', alongside its role as an agent of collection and research, repositions Indigenous people from a focus of study to a partner in the process (NMAI Act 1989). Its national exhibitions, like the recent *Native Words, Native Warriors*, use interaction and multimedia as reminders of the role that Indian code talkers played in the military (Schupman 2008). This presentation is available in dual modalities: both online and as a real-space exhibition. The nature of the reproducible digital form means that the exhibition can exist in several locations, and is concurrently touring the United States as an interactive and accessible exhibition that is re-housed in a range of different spaces. These forms reach a broader audience with fewer resources, and this delivery capacity has allowed the work to be shown in spaces that are closer to the communities represented in the exhibition.

The use of new media forms throughout the NMAI circumvents the risk involved in both the online mode and real-space domain that a collection of objects continues to represent a moment that remains frozen in time while a culture continues to change. Through the capacity for updating and capturing the contemporary and changing stories of Indigenous communities and peoples, communities become engaged in reinvigorating their own cultural representations. Further supporting this process and addressing some of the concerns of a pan-Indigenous representative voice, the NMAI's program of curatorship and research also identifies communities

as experts and addresses the difference of geographical areas within the museum structure by identifying liaison workers who represent that geographic area as the museum-based contact.

The issue of authorship and the present voice of community have also been played out in the online and physical space of the National Museum of Australia. Beyond the initial difficulties of a perceived overcorrection of Indigenous representation, the ongoing exhibition space of First Australians demonstrates a focus on a better understanding of contemporary and traditional Indigenous life, and in this way both invokes and challenges Robins' discussion of the Indigenous display as a tool of agency. The project challenges it, because it appears to have an Indigenous voice that aims to educate on Indigenous culture and life, thereby reinforcing the museum role of educator of indigeneity to a non-Indigenous audience. The material, however, does move beyond a historical view of Indigenous identity by creating an interactive dialogue on contemporary, traditional, urban and rural Indigenous lifestyles that suggests an Indigenous-centred perspective even where stories take up a specific position or representation. As in the 2009 exhibition *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, these moments are able to form a broader pan-representational role (Neale 2009). Arguably, this space is articulated more meaningfully because of the capacity of materials to be relocated through digital reproduction from community into this space of display, and their dual location on the website, with further stories and digital material that builds on what is available in the limited space of the museum, extends the context and scope of representation.

While Indigenous-identified and, to some extent, controlled spaces like the NMAI and the National Museum of Australia's First Australians gallery encourage a rethinking of authorship and protocols around representation, a key challenge remains how to manage this process in spaces where the Indigenous focus is less clearly articulated. Similarly, the risks and opportunities of the digital domain become pressing with the increased capacity for uncontained reproduction of digital materials through the internet. Tools like Janke's important ethical protocol guides produced for the broader arts industry and delivered by the Australia Council for the Arts (Janke and Australia Council for the Arts 2008), combined with her more recent, inclusive intellectual property treatise, *Beyond Guarding Ground* (Janke 2009), contribute a range of resources to scaffold a response to engagement that encourages museum policies to be informed by the broader Indigenous cultural requirements rather than their historical policies and practice. Similarly, the processes being proposed through the development of the National Indigenous Art Commercial Code of Conduct and the Indigenous Communal Moral Rights legislation will be key tools in supporting Indigenous-centred perspectives (NAVA 2009).

The process of managing both the digital image as a separate and reproducible item, and its potential as a process of showing and presenting culture without the removal and rehousing of objects, is a key aspect to the appeal of the digitisation

and new media models. The Indigenous voice of these processes may, however, be difficult to achieve from within the national non-Indigenous museum space, where internal processes and program management are also required to maintain the overarching voice of the museum. Where Australian and international programs of Indigenous engagement in the museum have been actively sought, these engagements have still positioned the Indigenous curator as primarily responsible to the museum, thus creating a tangible separation between the museum and the community being represented, with the curator positioned pivotally. The capacity for new media forms to both relocate the curator and the objects, and the themes of display, may help to break down the hold of the museum by literally removing the engagement from the physical space, by inhabiting that third space, and by potentially assisting in the reversal of the gaze in creating spaces where Indigenous communities can engage with a relevant museum and become a viewer of that space in which they can explore their own and other cultural moments.

The Smithsonian's NMAI has clearly indicated, through its program development, that it will avoid a static view or construction of community and identity, a resolution that is aided by the engagement of Indigenous voices through the process but not always achieved in the developed program. Beverly R Singer, in discussing her engagement to work on *Who We Are*, a film commissioned for the 2004 opening of the NMAI, highlights some of the difficulties that can occur when, with the best of intentions, the showing space begins to dictate the capacity and means of the story to be told. She relates the importance of maintaining Indigenous authorship and engagement when this power relationship is unbalanced, as evidenced in the insider information she possessed, which ultimately protected cultural materials that would have been otherwise used (Singer 2005). The formidable space of the museum can take primacy over the process, and the digital space may be an opportunity of engagement that relocates the power by removal to a neutral zone.

As Nakata et al. (2008) have highlighted, the collecting houses are so behind in simply managing material into their archives, and so concerned with maintaining appropriate strategies, that they find it difficult to move beyond these pragmatic issues to realise the potential of Indigenous contributions and engagement. Arguably, Indigenous communities have become a problem to solve for archives and collections, rather than a relationship to develop.

Similarly, communities themselves may be concerned about the power and authority that nationally funded museums may hold. The return of remains to communities has been a hotly contested issue, as has the failure of the broader community to accept Indigenous interests in such matters.

Historical precedents — like the case of Kennewick Man, the 9300-year-old Indigenous person removed from a grave, who, in a moment invoking Solomon, remained with scientists when a contestation of Native Communities kinship to the remains could not prove tribal heritage — may inform a prevailing suspicion



that museums are more interested in their collections than the culture and community being partnered (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation n.d.). Digital remnants could be relegated to these same moments of decision and provability. The scientist and/or photographer is the holder of the copyright, the museum is the accepted authority that is able to prove provenance, and any dissenting Indigenous community without access to the same resources risks becoming marginalised as a partner in such a process. Projects like Ara Irititja become important in finding pathways of engagement that are reciprocal and edifying for both parties. The South Australian Museum has worked with the Pitjantjatjara Council cohort to share materials, the materials are validated and enriched by the association, and appropriate use or de-accessioning is a decision that has less risk and more opportunity for either party in a process that intends to show and display culture. If engagement and partnerships with Indigenous communities is a solution, then the NMAI and the National Museum of Australia's primary focuses on story and explanation, more than the artefact of the past, may provide solutions for representation that fulfil Robins' claim of museum as culture stakeholder.

The discussion around inclusion and community engagement is just one more step (where there have often been missteps) in the process of managing Indigenous cultural materials and interacting with Indigenous communities. We are still, as Indigenous people, often not included in the most central of questions over policy and engagement, and instead relegated to consultation on isolated moments of representation. Museums, like any organisations, are necessarily difficult spaces to interrogate. The workers are encased in a small industry that relies on networks, connections and the integrity of the curatorship. Yet it is not the curator or director who makes an agreement with a community; it is the museum as historic entity, and museums change policy, staff and political position over time. Within this frame of the culture business, what capacity does a museum have to entirely de-accession its collection of disconnected artefacts and, where a collection warranting digital reproduction holds value, will the museum be bound by its own dictates to ensure that it retains a financially important collection?

If we are at a crossroads of opportunity in the cultural displays that the community has come to expect from the ethnographic museum space, then technology and interactive spaces, both within and outside museums, may provide solutions that provide benefits to both parties with greater accessioning in the archive; with more opportunities for accuracy, authenticity and enriched provenance; and with an extension of the museum space and a space of showing that is genuinely Indigenous centred.

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