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Representing the Stolen Generations in the National Museum of Australia

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Abstract: The removal of Indigenous children from their parents has been part of the colonising relations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people since the earliest days of the British occupation of Australia. The National Museum of Australia is beginning the process of developing a collection of objects that will enable it to tell this significant story.
The paper will look at this curatorial process of 'remembering'. It will cover such issues as the structure of the Museum; the particular nature of the Indigenous section and its aims; the contested identity of an Indigenous object; relationships established between Museum staff and the community; the 'implied contract' of trust established with this community in order to tell their stories; and the 'object as witness' and the 'object as betrayer'.
Keywords: Stolen Generations: museum object; Indigenous exhibits; exhibition curators; National Museum of Australia

As curator in the Indigenous section of the National Museum of Australia this article represents my personal reflections on the presentation of Indigenous stories at the Museum, in particular the story of the of removal Aboriginal children.

In this article I want to address a series of issues and reflections, firstly general in nature and secondly in particular relation to the stories of the 'Stolen Generations'.

The National Museum of Australia – exterior
Photograph: George Serras

Issue one – the separation of stories

By law one section of the Museum is dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander exhibitions – separate from the other areas. So while that means we have a dedicated space, the Gallery of First Australians (GFA), it also means that the stories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are primarily told in different spaces. (There is Indigenous material in other sections but the main focus is on the GFA.) What difference does this make to the telling of Indigenous stories? For example, how different is it to tell the story of the cattle industry in Australia separately from the story of the occupation of Aboriginal countries by pastoralists? Does this separation avoid certain kinds of uncomfortable realities being made apparent, by presenting the stories as almost from two physically separate countries. Or does it honour the place of Indigenous culture in Australia.

What difference does it make to the response Indigenous or non-Indigenous visitors? Some Indigenous people may feel more comfortable to visit the Museum because they feel they have a section where they 'belong' and can find stories that they feel as relevant to their lives. For some non-Indigenous visitors, it can mean they can avoid any history they do not want to engage with.

This image is of an exhibit on possum skin cloaks. The story told here is of two Victorian Aboriginal women who decided to recreate the craft of making the possum cloaks that were such an essential part of their Yorta Yorta and Gunditjmara communities' culture before occupation. Photograph: George Serras

The Museum is not 'ethnographic' in the traditional sense. This possum skin cloak is not displayed solely as an artifact of traditional Aboriginal society but as part of the lived experience and response of a contemporary community in connection with that community's past.

This is a gallery *not of Aboriginal artifacts* but *of Aboriginal* ***people*** – and the objects are there are presented as part of people's lives, today and in the past.

The information is very often presented in the form of personal stories that illustrate the historical narrative.

This exhibit concerns a famous boxer from Victoria. It demonstrates the way in which personal stories are used to carry the historical narrative. Photograph George Serras

Issue 2. The material is presented as much as possible from an Indigenous perspective.

The aim in the GFA is to tell stories not as of 'them by us' but the 'story of us as told by them' – because the staff are predominantly non-Indigenous. An Indigenous person coming into the Gallery of First Australians should feel that their perspective, something of their narrative, in there. They should feel in some way 'at home'. This is achieved through different means. Community collaboration is part of exhibition development. All the exhibits are constructed wherever possible with the active collaboration of the community with which they are concerned. The Museum also works hard to establish in GFA an 'Indigenous voice' with the use throughout of direct quotations and audio-visual pieces from Indigenous participants and commentators, as distinct from a 'Museum voice'.

This means that the same story told in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous sections of the Museum might have a different focus or a different perspective.

Issue 3 – the historical relations between Indigenous people and museums/the academy

For staff working in the Indigenous section of the Museum, it is incredibly important to understand the negative perception that most Indigenous people have of museums. From an Indigenous perspective, museums are often understood as thieves or at best irrelevant or at worst offensive. Why?

Museums – and the academy – have very often taken objects, images, stories and give nothing back to the communities they took them from.
They have represented people in ways those people would not recognize themselves. It has been most often the story of 'them' not 'us'.
They have presented sacred objects that should not be on display or displayed inappropriate exhibits.

Many Indigenous people will not enter a museum because of this history. And some because they are afraid of what they will see. Communities still have memories of that kind of relationship between the academic/museum sector and themselves. Earlier this year I spoke to people in the Queensland community of Woorabinda. They remember an anthropologist visiting the community to collect information – which involved measuring and photographing people. One family remembers having to go into one room and having to strip off and be naked to have photographs taken – having a mother stripping of in front of her naked teenage sons. They still remember the shame.

How this affects my work will be addressed later in this article.

Issue 4 Telling a story through objects

There is the question of the nature of objects. A museum needs an object to tell a story. How does this work in the Indigenous section of the Museum?

One issue that arises, if we are aiming for a collaborative approach with communities to telling Indigenous stories in the Museum, is the different cultural responses to objects. A colleague went to work with an Aboriginal community to find the objects that would tell the story of that community in the Museum. And she found that she had been acting within a cultural assumption that all communities valued objects the same way as she did. She discovered that for that community history doesn't reside in objects but in stories and photograph. This community didn't value material culture in the way she expected they would. This is a cultural gap that affects the relation of the community to the museum. However that community was very keen to have their story told in the Museum – they just hadn't appreciated the language that the Museum uses to tell stories. They were prepared to speak that language to have their story told. However that leads us to the next issue

A collection of items being offered to the Museum. Photographer unknown.

Issue 5 – what is an Indigenous object?

Is a boomerang an Indigenous object? Of course it is – as are the other articles in this photograph. When the Museum talks about collecting 'Indigenous objects' this is what people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, think they should offer. All of us have been caught in the trap created by non-Indigenous people of what is authentically 'Indigenous'.

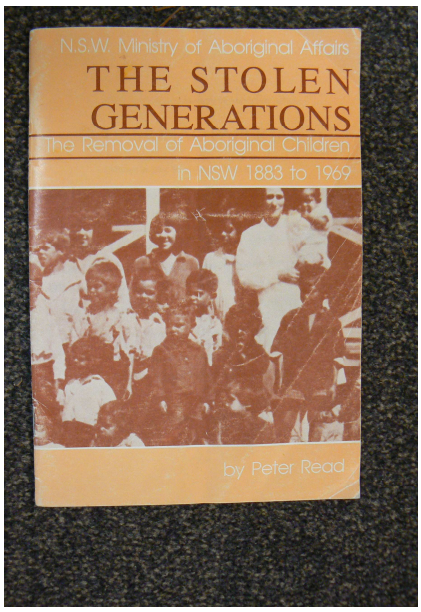
Stewpot from a former Queensland government reserve, now an independent community. Photographer Barbara Paulson

Is this stewpot an 'Indigenous' item? This giant stewpot was used at a large community in Queensland, once was a government institution, where people were incarcerated. This stewpot represents that period of incarceration – both the negative aspect – repression, police state policies – and the positive – the feeling of community that existed despite the repression, and also partly because of it.

These are seats from the old Bowra Theatre, Bowraville, northern NSW. The seats were removed in the 1960s. They have recently come into the Museum's collection. Photographer Lisa Milner

Are these funny old plush seats Indigenous objects? They come from the Bowraville Theatre in northern NSW and they were the seats that only white people were allowed to sit on. The Aboriginal people had to sit on hard wooden seats. They are part of the hidden story of discrimination in Australia

Issue 6 – What kind of objects then do you need to tell the story of the Stolen Generations?



First edition of *The Stolen Generations,* 1981. Photographer unknown.

One object we do have is the first edition of a very important item in the history of the Stolen Generations.

This booklet was written in 1981 by Peter Read and represents the first use of the phrase and more significantly, of the concept of the 'stolen generations'.

But other objects? What would we need to tell that story?
'That story' is of course a complex one with many different aspects.

- There are the personal stories of the parent and the child. We have no objects from parents – just as the Bringing them Home report, which recorded many hundreds of hours of testimony from people involved in the stolen generations experience, has almost no testimony from parents. How could a parent describe the experience of a child being taken away by the state, especially as parents were made to feel it was their inadequate parenting that caused the removal?

- There are the different responses to the same kinds of experience – the despair, anger, resolve to succeed despite all, the triumphant return to Aboriginality, the denial of Aboriginality

- There are different kinds of loss – personal, cultural. People were not only denied the experience of family life, of a relation with parents, siblings and extended family, but the transfer of cultural knowledge.

- There are the various institutions – church or government – and the foster homes or adoptive families who took removed children.

- There is the role of the government to be explored and the role of Link-Up, the government-funded series of organisations around Australia which work to re-unite separated families.

Issue 7 – what do people involved in this story want in relation to the Museum?

From my conversations with many of them, they seem overwhelmingly *to want to be believed.* To have their story validated

So while they may still have ambivalent responses to the museum, for them the museum is an authorised space. They know it is a space that non-Indigenous people believe in and furthermore and this is not only *a* museum it is the *national* museum. The men from Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home, a notorious institution that closed in 1970, tell me *We want the story told. We don't want it swept under the carpet.* They are looking for manifestation of their experience in a public place in the nation's museum.

Issue 8 – object as witness

Therefore the objects that we take into the Museum for the people of the Stolen Generations are to be witnesses to them, to their version of history. It is object as witness.

In this capacity it is in some sense a one-dimensional object, whereas in other cases the Museum might value objects for their multifaceted nature and the variety of stories they bring.

What are the few objects we collected so far? A boomerang A hatband. A bracelet. A battered print of Albert Namatjira. Two scrapbooks. A painting. A beginning of telling that complex story.

Painting by Mr. Cecil Bowden *There only crime was born Aborignal* 2007 Photographer unknown.

This is a painting by Mr. Cecil Bowden, a former inmate of the notorious Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Training Home in northern NSW. It is very moving work. It is a witness to Cecil's experience of being a removed child and it is the painting he chose as representing his experience as a member of the stolen generations.

Boomerang. Photographer Museum registration team

If we were a traditional ethnographic museum this is how we would possibly describe something like the boomerang photographed here.
"Mulga wood boomerang probably from far western NSW, incised with marks. Origin unknown."

Barbara Nicholson holds the boomerang given to her by her father. Photographer Barbara Paulson

But this is how we describe it in the text panel next to the object.
"This is all I have left from my father.

Barbara Nicholson was taken from her father when she was four years old. She never saw him again. Her father left her this boomerang, but Barbara has no idea where it came from or what the marks on it mean.

Link-Up can help find people's families and reconnect them with their Aboriginal community but some things can never be recovered."

Jack Tattersall left this boomerang for his daughter Barbara who had been taken away at aged four. When she found her way back to her community he had died. She has no other memorabilia of him. Barbara does not know what the marks on the boomerang mean or where it came from or what it meant to her father. The boomerang represents the cultural loss experienced by members of the Stolen Generations.

There are undoubtedly experts in the Museum who would know something of this boomerang. Barbara does not want us to tell her this kind of information because it should have come from her father. *Nor have we investigated this possibility* so the label on the object represents only what Barbara herself knows.

Hatband and bracelet in Aboriginal colours, given to Peter Read by Joy Williams on her return to her Wiradjuri family. Photographer Museum registration team.

The hatband and bracelet represent the journey back to Aboriginality of Joy Williams who was put in a 'white' orphanage because the authorities thought she could 'get away' with being white. It never occurred to these authorities that she might want to be Aboriginal Her family is one of the prominent Aboriginal families of the Wiradjuri community of central NSW.

Issue 9 – trust and the implied contract

There is an implied unwritten contract of trust I have with these people that I am working with on these stories. The 'contract' between us implies that if they tell me their stories I will then tell them in the Museum in the way that best represents their

histories as they see them. I send all the text of the labels to them. If they don't like it I change it and send it back again. I have told all the people I have mentioned that their stories will be included in this article.

Why all this? Because I am the heir to all that bad faith between Aboriginal people and museums, I have to work to restore that faith. It does not mean that I include anywhere material that I consider inaccurate or distorted history, but I keep faith in representing their stories as they see them

Issue 10 the particular nature of the stolen generation's history

This is particularly true when working with stolen generations material. This is 'new' history – still unfolding – still affecting the lives of living people. It's raw. Most countries have recent historical events which are deeply contested, where living people still bear the scars in bodies or minds of those events. The Stolen Generations people who are willing for me to present their personal stories in the Museum know that some visitors will not believe them, believe rather that these people are perpetuating some myth concerning the removal of children. It is an act of courage and of witness

Do we acknowledge these and other historical disputes in the Museum? Yes but not in this particular space. This is the space for their testimony. To do otherwise would break that contract of trust.

Issue 11 How can I stop the objects betraying the donors?

A friend of mine on thinking about giving his papers to the NLA decided he would not because *The people in the future - they'd probably get it all wrong.* This is the treachery of objects that are swept away from us in the tide of history and are found and taken up by others to tell other stories. I cannot control that. All I can do is attach the stories to the objects, using the words of the people who gave them to our keeping, so their objects may in the future continue to witness to those stories.

Dr Jay Arthur is an exhibition curator with the National Museum of Australia, in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program. Her interest in this area lies in post-occupation history, in particular in the role of institutions such as 'missions', mental hospitals and children's Homes in the colonisation process. Before becoming a curator she was a professional artist and a researcher in Australian English