



**NOTIFICATION:** This project is commissioned and funded under the ARC Development Fund for Indigenous Research and Researchers (2010-2013).

# Reversing the gaze: an Indigenous perspective on museums, cultural representation and the equivocal digital remnant

## OVERVIEW

The project aims to explore the capacity of nationally-significant museums in Australia, the United States of America and Great Britain\*, to incorporate their own Indigenous and First Peoples' stories, engagement and representations into their museum programs. In particular the project is concerned with examining best-practice examples identified by museum professionals.

As a further lens on the project, we are interested in the ways that technology as a tool of relocated stories and participation from communities that may be removed from these spaces of representation, might support the museum in incorporating a sense of Indigenous or First Peoples' identity and culture: the digital remnant - both as a tool of resonance and resilience.

In exploring the capacity of national museums to incorporate Indigenous and First Peoples' stories and representations into their exhibition programs, the project aims to support the museum industry in charting meaningful outcomes and in understanding the industry-identified representations of First Peoples.

## SCHEDULE

### AUG-OCT 2010 & JAN 2011

#### NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN THE UNITED STATES

Visiting the Smithsonian Museum System and targeted community and university museums.  
COMPLETED

### NOV-DEC 2010, SEPT-NOV 2011

#### NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN GREAT BRITAIN

Visiting museums in England, the formal systems of the National Museum Wales and the National Museums Scotland and other nationally-significant museums and cultural spaces throughout Great Britain

### CURRENTLY IN THE UK

### JAN-DECEMBER 2011

#### NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN AUSTRALIA

Visiting the Informal Museum System of Australia and targeted State Museums.  
CURRENT

### JAN 2012- MARCH 2012

#### REVIEW PROCESS

Contact will be made with contributors to request approval for inclusion in the final text.

### MARCH 2012- SEPT 2012

#### MANUSCRIPT WRITEUP

The findings will be ordered into the first-draft manuscript.

## FIRST PEOPLES OF BRITAIN, AUSTRALIA AND THE USA

At the centre of this research is the position that as a measure of national cultural resonance with First Nations Peoples, it is important to locate how national 'keeping places' represent, engage with, and interpret their First Nation's People. The project, which was commissioned and funded by the Australian Research Council, aims to explore three multi-nation states, Australia - the home of more than 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations, the United States of America and it's nationally-recognised and state-recognised tribes, and those tribes that do not yet have recognition, and Great Britain (and it's broader multi-nation housing of the United Kingdom) as a formalised multi-nation state with less frequently articulated First Peoples communities within. In each case, the project aims to explore not just historical contexts, but also contemporary representations.

## GREAT BRITAIN

In this hand-out, we will attempt to answer some initial questions around the inclusion of Great Britain, an inclusion that has had the most interest and, in some cases, the most skeptical responses.

Invoking the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian or the National Museum of Scotland as examples of spaces that explore First Peoples' identities, this project aims to locate these central spaces that house collections of significance to the nation, spaces that explore both enduring and changing legacies of identity and culture, and that explore their First Peoples' experience.

We identified a particular problem in England, during our early investigations and thanks to the support of a number of English institutions, we identified a very specific problem in using the word 'Indigenous'. We understand that there are difficult contemporary associations with this word that has been used by some political groups to exclude the broader multicultural and multinational identity of many British people. It is not our intention to promote an exclusive space by exploring the term First Peoples in the context of either British or English (or Welsh or Scottish) cultures, but instead to explore what this sense of First Peoples' identity means in both a contemporary and historical context, including the relationship of First Peoples culture with its more recent citizens.

The capacity of the First Peoples of Britain to, at first survive, and subsequently engage in, colonisation, has had significant traction in the British-identity markers of the museum space - but this project aims to move beyond the notions of apologetic/triumphant cultural hoarder or agent of *Enlightenment*; and into a review of how enduring depictions of First Nations' British cultures and community can help all British citizens and visitors to better understand the culture/s that have emerged. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the significant work that major museums in Britain are undertaking to explore this engagement. To illustrate, this project further invokes the demonstrations throughout the Museum of London that interweave multicultural London with an ongoing cultural legacy of preservation of many identifiers of London as a 'native' space through, for example, the connection to the Thames, patterns of habitation, and important cultural and religious spaces. Common to most *native* museums is a sense that place, history, culture, language, art and the preservation and evolution of these elements, is a central remit of First Peoples. In British museums, in particular, it is also refreshing to see strong attempts to explore the fundamental influence of the diaspora of peoples that have changed and remade Britain.

*\*Further information on why the countries of Britain were selected in contrast to the broader multi-national entity of the United Kingdom, can be addressed if required, and will be explored fully within the publication.*

## WHICH MUSEUMS?

The project has been focusing on museums of national significance in Australia, Britain, and the United States that represent a range of their own First Peoples' communities. Museums that house national collections and hold major programs that focus on First Peoples have included those defined as ethnographic, art-focused, history or natural history, community and location-based museums. In the United States, this included the Smithsonian Museum's National Museum of the American Indian and major 'Native' museums around the country, but also included representations of First Peoples in other major American collections. In Australia this includes the national and state museums that have identified Australian collections and programs incorporating representation. In Britain, this includes museums that, regardless of size, have a national profile representing and exploring the First Peoples of Britain, including the formal national systems in Wales and Scotland and major and significant museums in England. It has also included some museums that participate in Partnerships UK and relevant spaces within The National Trust.

## APPROACH

The project will focus on elements of the museum program that are deemed 'successful' by their staff. The aim is to understand what exhibits, programs, events and activities provide best-practice moments in the representation of First Peoples, to celebrate and broadcast as effective.

The project is being undertaken from an 'Indigenous' perspective. As an Aboriginal Australian, who has spent some years working in the reclamation of human remains from museums, largely outside of the context of managing material culture – the items were typically returned to be buried - I have found myself automatically expressing concern at the space of the museum as a holder of Indigenous peoples' material wealth and stories. This project aims to challenge both my own internal dialectic, and provide a pathway for the position that many Indigenous peoples have felt as intruders and victims in the space of the museum, by reflecting on, and celebrating, the role that the museum can play in reconnecting and reinvesting our own experiences and representations in the national museum space.

Equally, the notion of an individual perspective is examined. An increasing impact on the positive inclusion of Indigenous-identified positions in the curatorial and management space of the museum means that we are better represented, but can or should we function as pan-Indigenous representatives - can we provide a reversal of the gaze within the museum space? As a further, important lens on the project, the role that Indigenous museum professionals play is explored.

## ONE SIMPLE QUESTION

Our engagement with curators, museum management, project managers and other museum professionals is in conversation, with one central question asking them to identify 'successful' elements in the representation of First Peoples within their museum program or activities.

## YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Conversations held will be privileged, with all parties given the opportunity to withdraw statements, ideas or exchanges at any time. Explicit use of this material will be sought up to the time of publication. Our first priority is protecting our participants, and it is important to note that this project is aimed at exploring **positive** exemplars of First Peoples' representation and engagement in the museum space. Ethical approval has been provided by Batchelor Institute Human Ethics Committee, along with an indemnification of the research outcomes. Further ethical information can be provided by contacting: robyn.ober@batchelor.edu.au.

## OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

This research is intended to provide for communities, museums and those invested in the collaboration between these groups, a comprehensive review of exemplary moments of Indigenous representation in major museum spaces. It is hoped that the research outcomes provide for museums, a clear sense of international benchmarking, strategies and a positive energy of engagement. The research will be written into a book to be ready for publication in 2013. An opportunity to submit a chapter in a further text (to be published in late 2013) will be available to participants that may have an interest in contributing. This will be co-ordinated in early 2013, but discussed during this visit. If our team can provide any further support or input to your programs, we would be pleased to support all requests.

## ARC SENIOR INDIGENOUS RESEARCH FELLOW: DR SANDY O'SULLIVAN



I am an Aboriginal Australian woman of the Wiradjuri people. The Wiradjuri are a nation that reside largely in what is now known as the state of New South Wales. We are a river, mountain and country people, known for our journeys and relationships (songlines and kinship system) with communities on the East and South Coast of Australia. On my mother's side I am ethnically English and Irish.

I work in the Research Division of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education as an Australian Research Council Indigenous Research Fellow (ARC Indigenous Research Fellow) and have a background as artist and curator. Australian Research Council Discovery Indigenous Researchers Development Fellowships and Funding are highly sought-after federal government awards, the first for our Institute. This project is funded for a period of three years.

Batchelor Institute is the largest Indigenous-only higher education institution in Australia. We are located in the Northern Territory in the far north and central parts of Australia, with students and staff coming to study from all over the country. Batchelor Institute has been funded by the Australian Research Council (Australian Federal Government) to undertake this research, to be completed in 2013. My role within the project is funded under a Senior Research Fellow Development Program.

I am working on this project with the support of two other researchers: Dr Peter Stephenson and Dr Lyn Fasoli. Peter is the Head of the Research Division at Batchelor Institute, and he has a keen interest in education, engagement and community support processes. Peter is a non-Indigenous Australian who has a deep commitment to Indigenous engagement in research. Also working on the project is Dr Lyn Fasoli. Lyn is an American-born non-Indigenous Australian senior researcher at the Institute. Lyn is an expert in the field of Indigenous Early Childhood Studies, and has completed a significant study on engagement of children in museum spaces.

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