Museums, Collecting, Agency

A Symposium

Tanya Zoe Robinson

On 1–2 April 2014, the Institute of Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney, Australia (UWS), hosted *Museums, Collecting, Agency: A Symposium*, in partnership with the Museums and Heritage Studies Programme, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (VUW).¹ Held at the Australian Museum (AM) in Sydney, the event brought together an outstanding lineup of speakers from Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, the United States, and Britain to explore questions of agency in relation to ethnographic museum collections and museum-like practices of collecting, with an emphasis on the histories and legacies of colonialism. In doing so, the speakers and audience (mainly academics, museum professionals, and museum studies students from Australia and the Pacific) ably brought these issues into the present through varied histories and practice-based case studies that ensured a very “living” approach to this growing research area.

Beginning with a Welcome to Country, the traditional Aboriginal greeting to visitors, Phil Gordon from AM set the scene with a history of recent Australian Aboriginal engagement with cultural institutions. He charted a high point of representation through museum and Aboriginal Keeping Place (cultural center) employment at about the time of Australia’s 1998 bicentenary that has since been subsumed through broader industry staffing cuts, a generalized sense of political redress and lessening political activism since the Rudd government’s 2008 symbolic “Apology to Indigenous Australians.” The following three presentations by young Indigenous men offered a hopeful counter to these concerns through the agency of their own art practice, research, and curatorial interventions. Matt Poll (Torres Strait Islander, South Sea Islander), Jonathon Jones (Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri), and Stephen Gilchrist (Yamatji people, Inggarda language group) offered insights into their engagement with historic, contemporary, and practice-led art and material culture research in American, European, and Australasian locations, highlighting the spirit of curatorial practice as a form of cultural heritage and the distributed presence of Indigenous Australian culture within the globalized present.

The histories and practices that underpin these networks of distribution became the focus of the next session, through an emphasis on historic acts of Indigenous and colonizing engagement at field sites and museums. Ira Jacknis from University of California–Berkeley presented three case studies investigating the varied agency, roles, and motivations of early twentieth-century Indigenous Canadians and Americans who acted as anthropologists in partnership with non-native scholars. Rodney Harrison of University College London centered power within the museum through the naming and ordering of objects dislocated from their source communities and the transactional realities that necessitate ongoing negotiation, for example, through con-

ceptions of Australian Aboriginal objects labeled “secret/sacred”. From VUW, Conal McCarthy identified longer histories of direct Māori engagement with museum practices of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting *taonga* that are carried forth through objects and practices today. For those from New Zealand, these papers called attention to differences in the use of terminology to describe “indigenous” or “indigeneity”—words rarely used in a country where non-Māori identify and orient themselves through the Māori term *Pākehā* and tribal affiliations are widely understood. Jacknis had used local terms (Kwakwaka’wakw, Tshimshian, Tlingit), but within the complexity of Australian language groups, Indigenous terminology is still emerging into common usage in English.

A concern with such ordering of differences began the second day, with Tony Bennett (UWS) using examples of twentieth-century museum displays that sought to characterize ethnographic differences: from evolutionary series depicting “progress”, to cultural tableaux that presumed assimilation, to portrayal of creativity against a “technological time-lag”, these displays provide ways to access readings about the management of relations with Indigenous populations. Similar readings were suggested by Nélia Dias from ISCTE-IUL Lisbon, who focused attention on France’s management of its colonial relations through a cultural collectivism, which saw French regionalism as constitutive of French cultural diversity against a wider colonial project based on retention of local customs. Through this, the differing ways in which culture was assembled in both the colonies and abroad was revealed.

Shifting to the present, Sean Mallon, from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, emphasized his museum’s guiding principle of *mana taonga*, which recognizes the power of objects and the role of communities in caring for and understanding collections—agencies made tangibly present through the distribution of authority enacted throughout the museum. For Wayne Ngata (Te Aitanga a Hauiti, Ngāti Ira, Ngāti Porou), the centrality of communities within a network of *taonga* was presented through a case study enacting the “digital repatriation” of objects from widely distributed collections. The continuing agency of objects that were once tangibly present and their ability to prompt capacity building for Māori were key outcomes. Such enduring relationships were also highlighted by Michelle Horwood, PhD candidate, VUW, through her case study of the Ngā Paerangi people of the Whanganui River, who have reconnected with their *tūpuna* (ancestors) now residing in the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Together, these papers emphasized a shift from repatriating material objects to repatriating knowledge within concepts of reciprocity and enabling agency.

Philip Batty from the Melbourne Museum built on these case studies by proposing a concept of “hybrid objects” that play multiple roles across museum networks. By interrogating conceptions of an essentialized “Aboriginal agency”, he suggested that objects act as prompts for new engagements, contexts, and ongoing relationships. Taking as a starting point the less tangible practices of dance, music, and singing, Aaron Corn from Australian National University (ANU) described his work with Yolngu elder and scholar Neparr a Gumbula, ultimately proposing that rather than collecting recordings of music, the goal should be the continuing of singing. Also from ANU, Kylie Message emphasized the need for local relationships through curatorial engagement with the similarly ephemeral records of 1960s and 1970s American Indian Movement protests.

The scale of museums was shifted dramatically through Huhana Smith’s (Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga, Ngāti Tūkorehe) closing keynote address, which took delegates outside the museum and into the cultural landscape. Her paper described a major environmental project in lower North Island, New Zealand, its conceptual underpinnings based on Māori ontologies, and the potential for land-based projects to offer a methodological framework for museum practice. Proposing a whole systems approach to the agency of objects, people, and intangible cultural

heritage networked around museums, her suggestion to “get out walking” offered a practical means to consciously and meditatively consider how, as researchers, practitioners, makers, and students, we all act as heterogenous agents within the wider assemblages that we know, in part, as museums and collections.

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■ **NOTE**

1. Museums, Collecting, Agency: A Symposium was held as part of a wider Australian Research Council research project titled Museum, Field, Metropolis, Colony: Practices of Social Governance. See http://www.uws.edu.au/ics/research/projects/museum_field_metropolis_colony#intro.