How Indigenous People Have Altered the Function of the Melbourne Museum

> *White race privilege and the oppression of indigenous women, men and children were legitimated by the state and connected to property and power*
>
> Aileen Moreton-Robinson[1]

Introduction

During the past two years the Melbourne Museum has begun implementing a policy of repatriation of human remains and secret/sacred material from its indigenous collections. Furthermore, new policies are being developed that will see Melbourne Museum the first in the Western world to accept that all indigenous material in their collections should be subject to potential repatriation. These moves, as well as significant changes in the manner of indigenous representation in exhibitions, an extensive indigenous recruitment program and other major policy changes, represents a dramatic shift for such an institution.

This is part of a broader transformation of the Museum's relationship with indigenous communities that has been evolving since the early 1970s. The changes that are occurring are the result of an indigenous community cultural revival that has forced the Melbourne Museum (one of Australia's oldest) to reconsider the manner in which it has historically dealt with indigenous peoples. The infiltration of the Museum by indigenous administrators, curators and other personnel has expedited changes in recent years, and the extent to which indigenous issues dominate internal debate in the institution clearly illustrate the tensions being generated.

In this essay I will look at how the function of the Melbourne Museum has been refocused in its dealings with indigenous matters in particular since its creation. In doing so I will interrogate the philosophy and ideas that underpinned the establishment of the Museum, and examine the policies and attitudes toward Aboriginal Australia that

prevailed in the first two thirds of its history. I will then look at the dramatic social, political and economic upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s in which indigenous people forced their political and cultural issues on to the national political agenda. The third part of the essay will chart the manner in which the aforementioned indigenous cultural/political revival impacted on the Melbourne Museum in the past two decades, and what the resulting contestation of space has changed. The essay will conclude with a projection of the possibilities of where the current changes might lead, and a reflection of what the future function of the Museum might represent.

Part One - Invasion, Dispossession and a New Museum

Indigenous people had occupied the area now known as Melbourne for at least 30,000 years before the arrival of British invaders. The establishment of a settlement in Melbourne saw the local Wurunjeri populace dispossessed, displaced and dispersed in less than a decade. But it were the ideas and underlying philosophies of the invaders that was to have a more profound and long-lasting impact on the dispossessed than guns and poisoned flour. It is therefore necessary to interrogate the underlying ideologies and assumptions of western scientific thought to begin to properly understand the subtext of racism that informed the development of early colonial Victoria.

Great changes in European thinking from the 16th Century led into what became known as the Enlightenment. In eighteenth century Europe the Enlightenment project had shaped notions of difference and 'race'. From the Enlightenment project emerged a theory of knowledge called empiricism and the 'scientific paradigm of positivism', which involved ideas on how humans can examine and understand the natural world. Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith says that this 'understanding' was viewed as being akin to measuring,[2] thus institutionalizing an obsession with measurement, classification, and 'knowing'. As Smith points out, the theories and ideas of the West are,

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[1] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Talkin' Up To The White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism, St. Lucia: University of QLD Press, 2000, 26.
[2] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999), 42.

> underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race.[3]

Dodson observed that for at least 500 years 'aboriginal samples' had been collected and taken to Europe where their display was intended to confirm European racial superiority, and 'has sustained western culture's construction of a predetermined role for indigenous societies'.[4] In Britain these ideas found expression in a psuedo-scientific organisation called The Royal Society, which had been established in 1660, and was largely comprised of amateurs and part-time enthusiasts. The society was dominated by, 'gentlemanly dabblers who could not by any stretch of the imagination have been called professional scientists but who lent to these bodies the indefinable but important weight of their standing and respectability'[5]

The Royal Society had sponsored Captain Cook's voyage to the Pacific and on board Endeavour was Botanist Joseph Banks who, reflecting the collecting, cataloguing and classification mania of the Royal Society, kept an extensive and intricate record of the voyage. His catalogue included not just a detailed daily diary, but also weather reports, tides, lists and illustrations of birds, plants and animals and peoples he encountered. Much of the flora collected by Banks was to find its way back to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, which after being established in the 1770s, was to become an important repository and exhibiting site for plant specimens from around the world. The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew came to symbolize the connection between education, science, technology and imperialism during the nineteenth century, and its displays were arranged geographically to create the effect of 'travelling around the world' for the visitor.

Throughout this era, collecting accompanied European acquisition of space, and as Paul Fox noted, each 'collection of objects constructed an image of a place previously

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[3] Ibid ,44.
[4] Cathy Dodson, A Culture Exhibited: The Museum of Victoria and Aboriginal Peoples 1970 - 1993, Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993, 5.
[5] J.M. Roberts, The Penguin History of the World, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 657.

unknown to Europeans'. When placed in museums these objects were 'transformed by their context into something that could be seen both as exotic and as typifying a place or people'.[6] As Smith notes, 'colonialism was not just about collection. It was also about re-arrangement, re-presentation and re-distribution'.[7]

Meanwhile, when the rapidly expanding settlement of 77,000 at Port Phillip had been given colony status in 1851 and gold was discovered soon after, 'it allowed the development and consolidation of an intellectual and cultural life faster than would have normally occurred'.[8] In September 1853 a motion was passed in the Legislative Council of Victoria requesting monies 'for the purpose of establishing a Museum of Natural History'[9], which on 1st March 1854 commenced operation modestly in the old Assay Office in Latrobe Street. On April Fools Day the same year saw the appointment of the first staff member, Zoologist William Blandowski.[10] The creation of the National Museum of Victoria was seen as a move that 'marked Victoria as part of the civilised world...thus distinguishing a "cultured" society from its corollary, the primitive'.[11]

The National Museum of Victoria was developed from the model of British Botanical and Zoological Gardens and museums, and as Fox noted, the 'colonial museum existed in a political space defined from the imperial centre. Consequently, the object in this museum existed physically in one place, while the knowledge about it resided elsewhere'.[12]

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[6] Paul Fox, 'Memory, the Museum and the Postcolonial World', Meanjin, Vol. 51, No 2, 1992, 308.
[7] Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies, 1999, 62.
[8] Carolyn Rasmussen, A Museum for the People: a history of Museum Victoria and its predecessors 1854-200, Melbourne: Scribe Publicationsm 2001, 15.
[9] R.T.M. Pescott, Collections of a Century: The History of the First Hundred Years of the National Museum of Victoria, Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, 1954, 3.
[10] Ibid., 4.
[11] Cathy Dodson, 1993, 17.
[12] Fox, 1992, 308-309.

In 1856 the museum was moved to the University of Melbourne where it was later to come under the influence of one Professor Baldwin Spencer, who had earlier been involved in the establishment of the Pitt-Rivers collection at Oxford. Spencer had been appointed as the first Chair of Biology at Melbourne University in 1887,[13]. Thus the museum became connected to developing controversies in the academic disciplines of anthropology, biology and ethnography. Baldwin Spencer was to firmly focus the new Museum on its anthropological collections, to the extent that when he became director ethnographic items numbered just 1200. 'Under Spencer's directorship and partly as a by-product of his anthropological fieldwork in Australia, these collections totalled 36,000 by his resignation in the late 1920s.'[14]

Spencer's strong anthropological emphasis, whilst heavily influenced by Social Darwinism, invites an analysis of a discipline that has been described as a 'quintessentially Western project.' According to Biolsi and Zimmerman, anthropology is

> a set of questions asked and answered by an "interested party" in a global and unequal encounter, the ultimate results of which are yet to be fully worked out. Anthropology is the academic discipline that makes sense of the Others the West has both created and encountered in its global expansion since 1500.[15]

Puckey observed that it was 'evolutionary theory that bound the disciplines of geology, archaeology, biology and anthropology within a universal time structure that was all too apparently Eurocentric'.[16] Smith said of anthropology that, 'of all the disciplines (it) is the one most closely associated with the study of the Other and with the defining of primitivism.' She went on to suggest the, 'ethnographic "gaze" of anthropology has collected, classified and represented other cultures' to such an extent that Anthropologists are the academics most disliked by a wide range of indigenous peoples.[17] These words of Smith in essence sum up the suspicion and hostility that typified indigenous/Museum relation for the greater part of the institution's existence.

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[13] R.T.M. Pescott, 1954, 89-109.
[14] Cathy Dodson, 1993, 20.
[15] Thomas Biolsi & Larry J. Zimmerman (eds), "Introduction: What's Changed, What Hasn't", in *Indians & Anthropology: Vine Deloria Jnr. and the Critique of Anthropology*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1997, 14.
[16] Helen Puckey, Museums & Indigneous People, unpublished essay, Melbourne University, 19
[17] Smith, 1999, 66-67.

Part Two - The Museum as a Contested Space 1972 - 2002

It was not until the early 1970s that the indigenous community were able to recover sufficient voice to be able to challenge Museum hegemony in the representation of Aboriginal peoples. The events that changed the political landscape were the great series of indigenous upheavals of the 1960s -70s, including the 1965 Freedom Ride, the 1967 Referendum and more particularly, the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy in Canberra.[18] These events both raised general community awareness of Indigenous claims for justice and land rights, but also saw a resurgence of pride and self-esteem in an Aboriginal community that until then had been devastated by incarceration, alienation and cultural oppression. This in turn generated a major cultural, artistic and intellectual revival in Aboriginal Australia which led to a challenge of all institutions that indigenous people regarded as involved in the cultural oppression of the indigenous community.

It should be said that this period of dramatic change in the Aboriginal community coincided with parallel challenges to the establishment and modernity that were occurring in the broader community in many parts of the Western world, including Australia. Noel Dyck saw the following parallels in indigenous communities in Canada, Australia and Norway,

> Their stubborn persistence despite assimilation policies; their attachment to ancestral lands as cultural and economic resources; their continuing allegiance to tribal forms of social and political organizations; their deep sense of grievance and injustice; and their persistent struggles in political, legal and public areas for autonomy in the larger nation-states.[19]

Feminist and anti-racist critiques had begun to strongly challenge the dominant European masculine narratives of Australian history, and it was inevitable that such disciplines as Anthropology and institutions such as academic history and Anthropology departments

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[18] See, G. Foley, Black Power in Redfern 1968 - 1973, at http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essays_page.html

[19] Noel Dyck, Aboriginal Peoples and Nation-States: An Introduction to the Analytical Issues., in Noel Dyck, (ed), *Indigenous Peoples and the Nation State: Fourth World Politics in Canada, Australia and Norway*, Social and Economic Papers No. 14. St. Johns, Newfoundland: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1985.

and Museums would feel the heat of such challenges. One of the first significant lines drawn in the sand occurred in 1972 when a group of Sydney Koori activists teamed up with young white students to form a group called *Eaglehawk & Crow*. The group issued a series of pamphlets challenging right of conservative, white anthropologists at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies at the Australian National University to exercise hegemonic control over the biggest collection of Aboriginal & Islander material in the world. This action prompted an intense debate, the repercussions of which linger to this day.

But the National Museum of Victoria remained largely impervious to the dramatic changes happening in the world outside its doors until a decade later in the early 1980s. Indeed, Cathy Dodson noted that in the 1970s the dominance of the 'salvage paradigm' as the Museum accepted large numbers of artefacts from Northern Australia in the belief that 'real' Aboriginal culture was rapidly 'dying out'. She observed that the museum did not 'seriously contest the notion that "real" Aboriginality lies somewhere north of the Brisbane line'.[20] Thus the descendants of those dispossessed by the same people who had founded the Museum in 1835, now in the 1970s found their existence ignored or denied by the Museum. This was reflected in the fact that the Melbourne Museum's collections of Central Australian ethnology (particularly Arunta) were 'one of the most outstanding collections in the world.'[21]

In 1980 the National Museum of Victoria underwent significant changes in focus under a new Director Dr Barry Wilson, in which the 'relationship between indigenous societies and non-Aboriginal Australians was discretely redefined'.[22] Until this time, as Rasmussen noted,

> Most Australian museums at that time were narrowly scientific, interested only other peoples cultures to the extent that they were deemed primitive and doomed.[23]

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[20] Cathy Dodson, 1993, 27.
[21] R.T.M. Pescott, 1954, 98.
[22] Cathy Dodson, 1993, 29.
[23] Carolyn Rasmussen, 2001, 260.

A new Cain Labor Government in 1982 led to the Museum developing a 'strategy to create opportunities for indigenous Australians', and after the 1984 appointment of an Aboriginal Liaison Officer, a Victorian Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Unit (headed by Wurundjeri elder Joy Murphy) was established to foster 'a better understanding between the Aboriginal community and the Museum'.[24] It should be said that the impetus for this change came primarily from an increasingly assertive Aboriginal community that was no longer prepared to accept their traditional subservient roles as 'specimens, informants and subjects'.

In 1985 an Aboriginal Resource Centre and Keeping Place were established in association with an independent body the Koorie Heritage Trust. This move, according to Dodson, 'empowered Aboriginal People within the Museum context' by placing them 'in a position of control over the public representation of their culture'.[25]

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[24] Cathy Dodson, 1993, 30.
[25] Ibid., p.31.

This development caused some consternation for some anthropologists and other academics when in 1990-91 the Museum Council, after a court action by James Berg under the *Aboriginal and Archaeological Relics Preservation Act 1972*, decided to repatriate the "Kow Swamp" skeletal remains to the Aboriginal community in Echuca'.[26] Archaeologists responded arguing that this "blocked the business of archaeology" and compromised the role of the museum, "negating the spirit of open inquiry for all people".[27] Former Museum Curator of Anthropology, Alan West, (who had discovered the Kow Swamp remains in the 1960s) felt that the decision to repatriate was 'vandalism'[28], and thus, perhaps unwittingly, represented the old era of thinking by the Museum. Another who was angry was ANU Pre-Historian Prof. John Mulvaney, who ironically had been one of the academics attacked by the *Eaglehawk and Crow* pamphlets of the early 1970s. Since the 1990s the issue of repatriation has been the field upon which the ongoing contestation between Aboriginal groups and the Museum has been fought.

Part Three - The New Corporate Melbourne Museum and Bunjilaka

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[26] Gaye Sculthorpe, Negotiating New Relationships: The Museum and Indigenous Peoples, in Carolyn Rasmussen, A Museum for the People: a history of Museum Victoria and its predecessors 1854-200, Melbourne: Scribe Publicationsm 2001, 337.

[27] Ken Gelder, and Jane M. Jacobs, Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998, 86.

[28] Alan West, interview with Cath Dodson, in Cathy Dodson, Appendices, A Culture Exhibited: The Museum of Victoria and Aboriginal Peoples 1970 - 1993, Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993, 14.

Events of more recent years illustrate just how much ground indigenous people have gained in their quest for greater control of Museum activity in relation to their communities. The greatest change to the Museum of Victoria (renamed after 183 amalgamation with Science Museum of Victoria) occurred when the new Melbourne Museum complex in Carlton Gardens opened in October 2000. The $226million complex was built on the site of a semi-disused space that was the old car park for the equally dilapidated Royal Exhibition Building which since the 1970s had become 'faded and degraded'.[29] As the new Museum building emerged from the excavated carpark, the Royal Exhibition Building was given a major facelift as 'a culmination of the long-drwan-out yearning to see Australian history granted a place in the landscape'.[30]

The new Museum Building was said to symbolise *Victoria On the Move* - the motto of the economic rationalist Premier Jeff Kennett. The spectacular architecture of the new building (with its structuring grid, irregular sculptural composition of forms and dramatic cantilevered blade) is a radical departure from the 'monolithic archetypal museum edifice' and 'classical porticoed temples to culture.' Indeed, it is claimed that when viewed from the Carlton Gardens side it can be 'seen as a multifaceted sculptural object in the park'.[31] Inside the museum is comprised of a series of major exhibition spaces, one of which is the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Centre where 'the nineteenth and twentieth century Museum's silencing of a living Aboriginal Victoria is both revealed and redressed'.[32]

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[29] Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper, Melbourne Museum: A New Architectural Identity, in Carolyn Rasmussen, A Museum for the People: a history of Museum Victoria and its predecessors 1854-200, Melbourne: Scribe Publicationsm 2001, 383.
[30] Ibid., 383.
[31] Ibid., 382.
[32] Ibid., 385.

It has been said that 'in a postcolonial framework, the museum has been challenged to the extent that systems of display and representation of Indigenous cultures can never innocently assume the distinctions of the colonial past.'[33] The space of Bunjilaka has become the site of collision between the old and the new museum. The collision of old objects and new manner of representation. The tension between new objects and old styles of exhibition and representation. Bunjilaka's local contemporary artists exhibitions like Lisa Bellear's strongly challenge notions of a 'dying race' and the illogicality of the 'salvage paradigm'. The conflict over ownership of the space between indigenous staff and white administration. The contradiction of commercial functions allowed in indigenous gallery areas. These collisions disrupt the original notions and meaning of the museum.

Furthermore, these tensions occur not only in the exhibition areas of Bunjilaka, but also upstairs in the areas of administration, curation and collection management. In these parts of the museum indigenous curators and mangers creat new challenges over issues such as representation, community access, unwarranted secrecy and repatriation, which in turn leads to questions like, "who owns the indigenous collections?"

Conclusion

Ten years ago Gaye Sculthorpe, then Curator for Indigenous Studies at the museum, observed that as the Aboriginal community pressure mounted, the museum had reacted by 'trying to get more Aboriginal involvement' and working on 'joint programs such as exhibitions'.[34] The situation is a lot different today with indigenous people much more assertive in their dealings with the museum and in their quest to alter the meaning and purpose of the institution as it relates to their world.

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[33]Helen Puckey, Museums & Indigneous People, unpublished essay, Melbourne University, 2002, 6.
[34] Gaye Sculthorpe, interview with Cath Dodson, in Cathy Dodson, Appendices, A Culture Exhibited: The Museum of Victoria and Aboriginal Peoples 1970 - 1993, Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993, 6.

This has resulted in the Melbourne Museum employing the highest number of indigenous staff of any museum in Australia; the most assertive (and thus controversial) indigenous exhibitions; a sense of ownership of Bunjilaka by the local Aboriginal community unparalleled in the world; a repatriation policy that is more radical than any museum in the world; and paradoxically, a generally excellent relationship with Aboriginal communities. The end result has not been negative for the museum, but rather has enhanced its reputation, with Bunjilaka being one of the most popular sites with visitors, especially those from overseas.

Given the dramatic change that the museum space has successfully absorbed in its first 150 years, and given the ongoing co-operation and goodwill of the indigenous community, the future possibilities might seem limitless. But there are significant ideological hurdles to be yet overcome, as Puckey has warned,

> While the efforts of museums seem promising and may be the state institutions best prepared for genuine reconciliation with indigenous nations, there still remains the pressing question; to what extent "has the transformation of the 'museum system' under postcolonial conditions made it into a completely different thing, or has it merely enhanced its charisma?"[45].

The challenge for the next generation of indigenous advocates of museum changes is to be ever vigilant against those within the museum who are resistant to he inevitable change to come. The future also implies that for Aboriginal communities the path must inexorably lead toward greater control of their own affairs politically, economically and culturally. The museum must accommodate that or become irrelevant in the Australia of tomorrow.

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[45] Helen Puckey, 2002, 13.

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