Victoria Haskins on representing interracial histories in the museum

‘Inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness’, said W. E. H. Stanner of the exclusion of Aboriginal-European relations from the Australian historical consciousness in his 1968 Boyer lecture. ‘It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned over habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a grand scale.’ This amnesia has extended not only from the repression of painful memories of massacres and rape, but even to the more positive memories of interrelationships. At its core is an inability to acknowledge the existence of Indigenous people, both before 1788 but especially after the arrival of the British.

Australian social memory has long been dominated by a myth of ‘the fatal impact’, that Aboriginal peoples and cultures trapped in an eternal time-warp were made brittle by thousands of years of separation from the rest of the world, and hence could not withstand contact with modern peoples and cultures. It’s a tenacious idea in settler nations like Australia, implying the inevitability of white supremacy, and denying the more awkward reality of ongoing racial oppression, and negotiated coexistence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people after the frontier. For museums, as receptacles of social memory, the systematic erasure, by non-Aboriginal people, of memories of relationships with Aboriginal people has meant a glaring absence of shared histories and cultures.

In contrast, the Aboriginal as ‘other’ has loomed large in museum exhibits since the earliest days of colonisation. The collecting of Aboriginal artefacts and physical human remains was a vital part of the process through which knowledge about Aboriginal people was accumulated and reproduced. Today, museums respond to public demands, curator Philip Jones reminds us, for uncomplicated images of ‘traditional’, ‘authentic’, and ‘savage’ Australia. Material culture bearing witness to cross-cultural encounters is either not collected or displayed, or displayed in such a way as to obscure that history.

These are more often problems in the perception of curators and museum managers, rather than in the attitudes of the supposedly uneducated public. Yes, indeed, Stanner pointed our attention to the ‘cult of forgetfulness’, but that was back in the 1960s. I was a year old when he gave that speech. I now teach students who were born in the 1980s. Two generations have grown to adulthood since that time, during which all manner of substantive political, economic, social and cultural changes have placed Aboriginal issues and race relations in the public spotlight for over thirty years. The Mabo decision of 1992 dealt a major blow to the fatal impact myth by fundamentally and unalterably rejecting the terra nullius concept. A multitude of smaller changes has accustomed rising generations of Australians to the assertion by Aboriginal people, ‘We have survived’.

These changes have been associated with a dramatic growth of interest in Aboriginal issues and the Australian past by the non-Aboriginal Australian public. The general Australian community wants to acknowledge and understand the past, especially the causes of the continued and painfully visible rift between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people — and ideally, heal it. Revisionist historians have made race relations the focus of their research and writing, and their work has been built upon and reviewed and reworked since then. There is a vocal and conservative group of Australians who would apparently have these histories forgotten all over again. But these same people are more than keen to engage in public discussion, albeit uninformed, about the Australian past — indeed the deliberate inflammation by certain prominent politicians of what is called the ‘race debate’ can only be interpreted as a recognition of the significance of this history.

The overall result is that memories that were painfully repressed for so long have surfaced and been aired, and people expect — and demand — that museums do address this past. Nor can they justify displaying only objects that represent a
hermetically sealed native culture. The only major museum today to thus explicitly restrict itself, the South Australian Museum, is admired precisely for its antiquarianism: it is the museum as 'time capsule' and a snapshot of Adelaide anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet even this museum bows to public interest in the history of race relations, and in so doing highlights how we can all recognise the authenticity of our shared histories.

In 2001 the South Australian Museum put on display an Aboriginal club from the Sydney region, turned into a naval cat-o'-nine-tails by a Master Blackburn. Preserved in Blackburn's family for two centuries as a relic of Australia's convict past, it has only recently been recognised as one of few surviving material traces of Aboriginal/settler encounters. Even those relics that do survive have not been valued and kept, but rather, like the spear that transfixes the first Governor's shoulder, have disappeared into the hands of private and overseas collectors.

The apparent lack of objects bearing witness to cross-cultural and shared histories in ethnographic collections can be rectified simply by adjusting our thinking away from the fatal impact of the 'real' Aborigines are never historical, always frozen in time immemorial. Within all the major museums' galleries of Aboriginal artefacts are 'entangled objects'. Some are overtly so, but even the most 'pristine' ethnographic items have interracial histories embedded in the processes of their acquisition, whether they be stolen, 'discovered', given, sold, traded, borrowed, commissioned or otherwise expropriated and owned. Although traditionally the rationale behind their display — their authenticity — lies in the insistence that they were created, at least, by authentic Aborigines, the museums can try instead — or at least also — to highlight the histories of racial interaction that form the context for their creation, function and acquisition.

Museums are accustomed to displaying relics of white culture to highlight their historical context, and native relics to highlight their exotic primitivism, but hybrid items such as the club-whip can flummox them. The challenge is to read into all this material - their authenticity - lies in the insistence that they were created, at least, by authentic Aborigines, the museums can try instead — or at least also — to highlight the histories of racial interaction that form the context for their creation, function and acquisition.

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MUSEUMS MUST ENGAGE IN A GENUINE DIALOGUE WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES TO DEVELOP CROSS-CULTURAL EXHIBITS.

Museums' difficulty with displaying and representing shared interracial histories as integral to Australian histories both reflects and perpetuates the damaging notion that sharing the land equitably and fairly, and moving forward together, is simply too hard. Ultimately, our ability to tell shared histories in any museum is limited by our abilities to share justly and equitably in the wider society. As long as a gross imbalance in social, economic and political power exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, representing interracial histories in the museum will be an uphill struggle, fraught with political problems. Unless museums make the effort to show that the barriers between us are not insurmountable by any law of nature or God, but are purely a human creation, they can only add to the growing resentment and distrust so many people seem to feel. Instead, museums should be striving to encourage a sense of compassion for each other, a clear-eyed understanding of the sufferings of the past, and a sense of hope and constructiveness about our shared future.

DR VICTORIA HASKINS IS A LECTURER IN HISTORY AT THE FLINDERS UNIVERSITY, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

This article has been abridged from a keynote address delivered on the opening day of the Museums Australia National Conference in Adelaide, 18-22 March 2002. A fully referenced version of the paper is available from the Museum National editor at editor@museumsaustralia.org.au