

Australia's missing history

1. Summary of impact

While the lives of British explorers like Captain Cook are documented extensively in journals, drawings and the minutiae of ship's logs, the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are too often muffled, removed from meaningful context or – more-often-than-not – missing altogether.

Right of Reply, a meeting of over 80 researchers and professionals from cultural institutions in Sydney, sought to help address these issues by connecting people and acting as a springboard for further action.

The project was awarded a UTS Social Impact Grant in 2019, which contributed significantly to the costs of the event.

2. The problem

Too often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are missing from Australia's historical record. This potential distorts perspectives and perpetuates unhelpful narratives about our past.

“Right of Reply is about giving voice to people,” explains Kirsten Thorpe, project lead and senior researcher at Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research.

She cites the Stolen Generations as an example of how perceptions of historical events can change – the NSW State Archive's collection portrays Aboriginal children in institutions as being well cared for but this is directly contradicted by the lived experience recounted by many of those same children as adults.

Bringing Indigenous voices into the story is particularly important as our libraries, archives and other cultural institutions move collections online.

“As content is curated, digitised and transcribed you can end up with datasets that may have been based on mistruths from the beginning, you’re basically just perpetuating the same kind of narratives, and potentially myths, of settlement,” she says.

3. Beneficiaries

Those working in the gallery, library, archive and museum (GLAM) sector benefited from connecting with others in the industry on the day, with the event acting as a springboard for further action.

“People came from right across the sector who recognised the importance of the issue but who perhaps didn’t know where to start,” says Kirsten. “They wanted to find out ways to enact this work, day-to-day.”

“If people are creating content now, they want to start to think about where that ends up in the future and how do you manage Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights alongside of that. At the moment this is happening with smaller projects, but the question is how would you scale this up into bigger institutional contexts?”

4. Approach to impact

An issues paper on ‘the right of reply’ was circulated before the event for discussion in an afternoon workshop. The notes from this session are currently being drafted into a statement for the Indigenous Archives Collective to progress the topic.

The opportunity to provide feedback on the statement will be made available on the Indigenous Archives Collective website in late 2020.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1 The outcomes

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) filmed a number of presentations on the day. Those where speakers have agreed to be published will be made available online – alongside the issues paper developed out of the workshop – in late 2020.

5.2 Impact

The project team hopes to progress the conversation, supporting GLAM practitioners to push for change in cultural institutions big and small.

The stakes are high, says Kirsten.

“Our approach to the historical record as a nation needs to be brought into the ‘truth-telling’ paradigm. This is about reconciliation.”

The team at Jumbunna and the Indigenous Archive Collective hope to make the symposium an annual event to further the debate, identify possible solutions and increase the issue’s visibility.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

Renowned University of Oregon archivist and historian, Jennifer O’Neal, was keynote speaker, bringing international perspective and raising the bar – the US hosts a vibrant network of Indigenous organisations that are actively engaged in data collection.

“I also think UTS and Jumbunna Research are in a really unique position to take carriage of some of the conversations that can’t happen necessarily within institutions but needs a research agenda aligned with it,” says Kirsten.

The event was co-sponsored by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Monash University, the Australian Society of Archivists

(ASA), the ATSIDA project at UTS Library, the State Library of NSW, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA).

7. Challenges

With the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence filled to capacity for the event and organisers forced to create a wait list because of excess demand, the appetite for change is clearly out there. But the will, the leadership and the ability to resource initiatives could be hard to come by in a financially pressed sector that struggled to make ends meet, even pre-COVID.

“A lot of Indigenous GLAM workers are often in the day-to-day grind of this so people are hitting against these barriers without necessarily having the forums to discuss their aims and hopes,” says Kirsten.

Despite these difficulties, the stakes are high enough to warrant the investment – for individuals, such as those impacted by historical injustices like the Stolen Generation, Indigenous communities more broadly, and as a way for Australia to genuinely come to grips with its past and move forward, says Kirsten.

8. References

Link to keynote: <https://vimeo.com/385883696>