Local Histories, Global Cultures:
Contemporary Collecting in Transnational Space

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2012

mum, I dedicate this work to you

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THESIS SUMMARY

How might knowledge of socio-spatial reality beyond regional boundaries help social history museums continue to support and define regional identities? Inspired by actor-networks and emotional geography, this thesis brings posthumanism to an Australian regional museum to study contemporary people-place interactions. Research stems from a responsive, inclusive and participatory museology.

Using a *museum/laboratory* construct to destabilize subject/object, people/place and local/global dualisms, a participatory, performative methodology: *body mapping*, brings identity and place into being. This event produces new worlds beyond classification, expressive of non-representational concerns, and attentive to the senses and contemporary mobilities. Shaped by museum users as collaborators and co-constructors of embodied knowledge, these worlds challenge and enliven the museum.

A **viscero-spatial curatorship** develops. This *more-than-institutional thinking* folds theory and practice to evolve the museum as a site of production. Here, mobile bodies enact global space, and interpretation becomes an emotional engagement with multiple worlds. Boundaries separating the research, collection and display of place-based identities dissolve. This emergent working practice captures local identities as human/non-human entanglements in fluid, affective transnational spaces.

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE

I certify that the work in this thesis, *Local Histories, Global Cultures: Contemporary Collecting in Transnational Space*, has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research performed between 2008 and 2012, and that it has been written by me. Any help and assistance I have received in my research has been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Ethics committee approval was obtained for this research on 08 June 2009, with reference no: HE29MAY2009-D06633.

I declare that this thesis consists of 84, 088 words.

Rachael Nenaya Vincent
Student number: 40645029
Date: 25 July 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Back then I never envisioned doing this. Things changed when I moved to Edinburgh. Ann, I remember how your generosity and support in those early years helped to make this possible. Thank you for setting me off on this path of objects, stories and extraordinary ideas.

Madeleine, I am indebted to you for letting this research happen at the Museum of the Riverina. Your support and enthusiasm for the MAP:me exhibition was so generous, and so energizing. I would also like to thank Anita and Cheryl, senior managers at Riverina Community College, for taking the risk with this project and getting on board.

To Chantal, Cynthia B, Cynthia C, Judy, Mindy, Sam, Sharleen and Travis, the keen and curious College staff who took part in this unusual venture: I am so thankful for the extraordinary wealth of information you contributed to this research. It was such a pleasure working with you.

I am grateful to Macquarie University who provided financial support for this project and three excellent supervisors. Andrew, Donna and Katharine (my principal supervisor when Donna went on maternity leave), your insight and sound advice never failed to sharpen my focus and keep me on track. You have helped me to write something I could not have imagined.

And to Dr Standen and staff at Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre, thank you for giving me this new life to cherish in Australia.

FOREWORD

My interest in museums has been constant, yet it took a while to consider working in them. I entered the museum sector as a volunteer, about four years after graduating from a first degree at Leeds University (in the north of England), and after nearly four long years as a call centre employee. Since childhood, I have had a fascination with objects, the more unusual the better: the haunting and astonishing, the taxidermied and desiccated and forgotten. During my call centre years, museums were places to which I escaped. In them, facets of human life – stories overt and implicit – have drawn me through countless galleries. Now, after 12 years of working as a social history curator in regional museums in Scotland and England, collecting objects and recounting both past and present through the deeds of local people, I find myself in Australia at work on this thesis. This is a project that deconstructs the sector's approach to research, acquisition, interpretation and material culture.

What is the reason for such an undertaking, and why replace full time employment with full time study? In the last decade, I have witnessed some exciting changes to the sector, reflected in organisational structure and enacted in the *practice* and *process* of curatorship. Thoughts turn to my last two jobs: for the Kelvingrove New Century Project in Glasgow (in Scotland), and at the Museum of Bristol (in the South West of England). These two new capital projects endeavoured to put the lives of previously unknown Glaswegians and Bristolians centre stage. While Kelvingrove 'completely reconstructed the epistemology upon which museum displays are based' by adopting an 'object-based, visitor-centred storytelling approach' (O'Neill 2006: 44), the Museum of Bristol experimented with the concept of 'civil engagement' (Black 2010), a 'participative relationship with [...] local communities' for the purpose of 'incorporating their voices and life experiences' into the fabric of the museum (Black 2010: 130). With hindsight, I note how these two personal experiences have come to reflect a global, sector-wide trend.

Immersion in these environments was largely creative and inspiring. Yet, there was also frustration, as curatorial practices of **research** and **collecting** around **identity** and **place** remained largely under-theorized, and lagged behind newer interpretive approaches. My particular concern was how to collect contemporary local identities against a backdrop of globalisation and the myriad shifting, fluid spatial networks of which people are now part. Spotting this imbalance in both theory and practice made me want to build sector knowledge by testing the limits of curatorial practice, and a research project began to take shape.

The word 'curator' appears throughout this thesis. Traditionally, curators work with objects; their principal task is to have responsibility for a collection, to acquire new items, and to research and document the objects in their care. Yet, I have been privileged to work in the museum profession at a time of great transformation in the role of the curator. This thesis takes place within a collecting sector now engaged with *people*: people as visitors and learners, and people as narrative focal points for interpretive and public programs. As museums have shifted from collections to focus on the experience, knowledge and potential of visitors, the individualistic style of curatorship has been supplanted by a more collaborative approach. This way of working lies at the heart of this thesis.

As a social history curator, I am interested in how museums can develop strategies to embody the often messy, convoluted and multi-dimensional realities of local identities. Working in city museums has instilled a fascination with fluid and complex interpretations of place. This thesis combines both interests to explore how such complexity is manifest in a regional context, through new ways to understand the contemporary dynamics of 'people-in-place'. This is a concept that goes beyond regional museum boundaries, to geographical phenomena at once local and global, real and imagined, theoretical and ephemeral. This project is driven by human geography. With theories and methods largely unfamiliar to museology, this discipline provides the conceptual tools for experimentation.

In 2008, I travelled to Australia to gain new knowledge in a new hemisphere with a very different understanding of regional museums. In the UK, as part of Bristol

Museums, I worked under *Renaissance*, a landmark program delivered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which lead to a £291 million investment in England's regional museums. Towards the end of this year (2011), Arts Council England (ACE) assumed responsibility for delivering regional museum funding. Under ACE, *New Renaissance* has a budget of £43.6 million for the years 2012-15. This 'improvement programme' is considered to be 'the key way to drive excellence and deliver long term change in museums in England, with the aim of attracting more visitors to museums and enabling people to experience them in new and innovative ways' (Arts Council England 2011: online). The funding scheme has four main strands: a major grants program to which all regional museums can apply, a national program to support museum standards, a strategic support fund to target areas of development not addressed by the major grants, and funds to offer professional guidance for museums that are not awarded strategic funding (Arts Council England 2011).

Things are different for regional museums in Australia, however, change is afoot. Arts NSW has recently commissioned work on a *Strategic Plan for the Visual Arts and Museum Sector in New South Wales*. The plan focuses on support and key priorities for the development of 'the small to medium sector' over the next five to 10 years (Arts NSW 2010: online). While it is beyond the range of this study to extend an exploration of experimental geographies into the wider museum sphere, the idea of fluid 'museo-spatial' networks, that shape in response to stimuli from city, region and state, is particularly interesting. A geographer's understanding of spatiality, when considered alongside the strategic development of volunteer and professional museums in regional New South Wales – particularly with regards to opportunities for partnership working, visitor needs and networks of interaction – would make an excellent subject for future research.

This project has been a professional and a personal adventure that started with a move to Wagga Wagga, promoted as 'the largest inland City in New South Wales' (Discover Marketing 2011: 3). To live in Wagga Wagga is to experience a new colour palette. The move has signalled many new pursuits. It has lead to frequent walks along the iconic Murrumbidgee River. For an avid bird watcher, it has heralded the

first of many glimpses of exquisite parrots and cockatoos, noisy honeyeaters, and tiny wrens and silvereyes. It has meant the internationally familiar sound of kookaburras, and the unfamiliar carolling of magpies, one of the world's most complex bird songs.

With a growing population of around 60,000 people, Wagga Wagga is markedly smaller than both Bristol (around 400,000 people) and Glasgow (around 600,000 people). Yet the city is thriving and vibrant. It is one of seven regional cities that have united to form the *Evocities Campaign* (2010) to encourage people living in Sydney to move to a better quality of life in regional New South Wales. Wagga Wagga is culturally diverse and well connected, not only to the wider Riverina region of which it is part, but also to other large towns and cities at state level and internationally. In the urban and rural landscapes of Wagga Wagga and the Riverina many stories wait to be told. Hence, there is a strong relationship between my research and this particular setting.

This project has taken place at the Museum of the Riverina – a social history museum that aims to 'lead the way in innovation and developing new ways of approaching and presenting heritage' in the region (Museum of the Riverina 2010a). It is outside the scope of this research to expand to an online format, so the project has evolved within the physical space of the researcher's office, a room used for public programs and a temporary exhibition gallery. Shaped by the unfolding experience of a curator/researcher, this thesis has sought to build on the creativity of which I was part while working in the UK. This work has drawn me through uncharted territory; research has been a lively fusion of audacity and innovation, collaboration and co-creation.