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Objects, agency and context: Australian Aboriginal expressions of connection in relation to museum artefacts

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Abstract
This article discusses the interactions of a group of Australian Aboriginal people with museum-based artefacts and photographic images, and their re-connection to these materials inside and outside the museum setting. Themes of connection and agency relating to these materials were invoked in the process. The complex social biographies of some objects mean they are at times discussed as having agency, or interpreted as being culturally perceived as such. In the case detailed here, the affect expressed in responses to a variety of objects indicates different interpretations. The discussion therefore considers the logic of connection expressed in Aboriginal ontologies to argue against ideas of the agency of objects. It is instead suggested that the meaning invested in them is related more to their material qualities and the contexts in which they are perceived. This consideration is grounded in a discussion of a collaborative project between researchers and Aboriginal people in which these matters arose.

Keywords
Agency, Lamalama, landscape, objects, images

Introduction

Discussion about the heritage of subaltern peoples often engages notions of displacement and disconnection, particularly in their effect on intangible heritage, and the tension posed by the impacts of modernity. In this article, I discuss themes arising from a research project that aimed to ameliorate some of these processes through collaboration between Aboriginal people, museum and university-based researchers. The project sought to assist Lamalama people of Cape York Peninsula, Australia, to strengthen their connection to

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their heritage in the Donald Thomson Ethnographic Collection, held by Museum Victoria (MV), through engagement and interaction with some of their heritage materials contained within it. The Lamalama are members of the broader diaspora resulting from more than 200 years of change and physical displacement since the colonisation of Australia. Despite this history, they can be understood to share with other Aboriginal people in a tradition of ontological thought that poses connection and respect for life as primary and continuing values.

The agency of objects and their capacity to prompt forms of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) or, perhaps more accurately, 'collective remembering' (Wertsch, 2002) are considered as part of the discussion, as are affective responses by the Lamalama to a range of objects – artefacts, images and landscape. Their reactions illustrate a fundamental point about the presumed agency of objects: while artefacts, images and landscape may each have social biographies and therefore seem to express independent agency, it is the human assignment of meaning rather than any agency within the objects themselves that leads to this perception. I draw on personal observations, oral history and telephone interviews with Lamalama people and discussions with my colleagues participating in the project in drawing the conclusions presented here. I first briefly provide more information about the Lamalama and describe stages in the research project that illustrate differing responses by them when changes in location of their heritage materials occurred as part of the research process. Connection and disconnection are recurring themes in this consideration of Lamalama interactions with their heritage.

Working with source or descendant communities associated with museum collections has been the subject of recent discussion (Krmpotich, 2010; Peers and Brown, 2003). Increasingly, the Lamalama have been interested in accessing and maintaining close relationships with their heritage materials in museums such as MV and the South Australian Museum (SAM), establishing positive relationships with those responsible for their management. For the Lamalama, it is a 6000-kilometre return trip from Cape York Peninsula to the MV campus in Melbourne. Nonetheless, along with other Aboriginal people in Australia they have accessed their heritage in museum collections, working with individual curators and other researchers. It is not uncommon that people such as the Lamalama live at some distance from the museums that hold their heritage materials and require financial assistance as well as museum goodwill in the form of specific organisational missions and programs in order to access it (Fienup-Riordan, 2003).

As Allen and Hamby (2011) indicate, accessing collections in this way is sometimes the result of the interest and actions of particular group leaders. It is also sometimes necessitated by land claims or native title processes, which require Indigenous people to prove their connection to land through a set of formal legal processes, and both of these contexts apply to the Lamalama. Over the last two decades, the Lamalama have slowly won back a major part of the land that constitutes their traditional country through a variety of claims, negotiations with the state and agreements with other title-holders, such as pastoral lessees. They have been assisted in this by anthropologists, linguists and lawyers, often employed by regional Indigenous representative organisations. Ethnographic collections such as the Donald Thomson Collection, on loan to Museum

Victoria, and the Norman B. Tindale Collection at SAM in Adelaide have been primary sources of supporting data for these purposes. The Lamalama have a long-standing relationship with the Thomson Collection in particular, initially through working with the anthropologist and linguist Bruce Rigsby and the curator Lindy Allen, but also at the initiation of Lamalama elder Sunlight Bassani and his recognition of the potential offered by accessing and engaging with the collection.

The historical experience of the Lamalama

Sunlight Bassani's interest arose as a result of his concern about the future of his people. The Lamalama are a group of perhaps 150 people, with a core group of around 60 people residing for the most part in the small, central Cape York Peninsula town of Coen, almost 100 kilometres away from *Yintjingga* (Port Stewart), a central location in their country around Princess Charlotte Bay. The term 'country' is often used by Aboriginal Australians to indicate their traditional estates in land.

The core Lamalama group consists largely of members of five separate families, or surnamed groups, many of whom can trace descent to George Balclutha and his two wives. George Balclutha is mentioned by Thomson in his fieldnotes and is personally remembered as their grandfather by some older Lamalama people today. At contact, the Lamalama consisted of members of over 35 different clan groups who occupied land around the Bay, from Massey Creek in the north to the Kennedy River in the east and extending south to the area now known as Kalpowar Crossing (Figure 1) on the Normanby River. The descendants of those separate clans constitute the unified 'language-named' Lamalama 'tribe' of today. As the pastoral industry pushed the frontier of settlement north in the later years of the 19th century, the country of these clan groups was subsumed and relatively large pastoral stations were established.

In 1961, approximately two dozen Lamalama people were removed from the bush at *Yintjingga* and forcibly retained at Cowal Creek (now Bamaga), some 400 kilometres away. Most of the older people died there. Some Lamalama people remained behind in Coen, and in the intervening years they were restricted from access to their lands, unable to carry out important ceremonial activities. Associated transmission of language, cultural knowledge and practice across generations was severely constrained, and it was not really until the 1980s that the Lamalama were able to begin once again to establish their presence on their traditional country (Hafner, 1999; Rigsby and Williams, 1991).

In the later years of the 20th century, a number of pastoral properties on Cape York Peninsula were converted to national parks. After the passing of the Aboriginal Land Act in the state of Queensland in 1991, most of these national park lands were gazetted for claim by the appropriate Aboriginal traditional owners, beginning a process by which groups such as the descendants of the earlier clans, now amalgamated as the Lamalama, were able to re-establish their presence on their country. The Lamalama were beneficiaries of a number of such processes, in particular joining with other Aboriginal people as claimants of Lakefield National Park (now Rinyirru National Park [CYPAL]), and in their own right as the claimants to the Cliff Islands National Park (now Marpa National Park [CYPAL]).

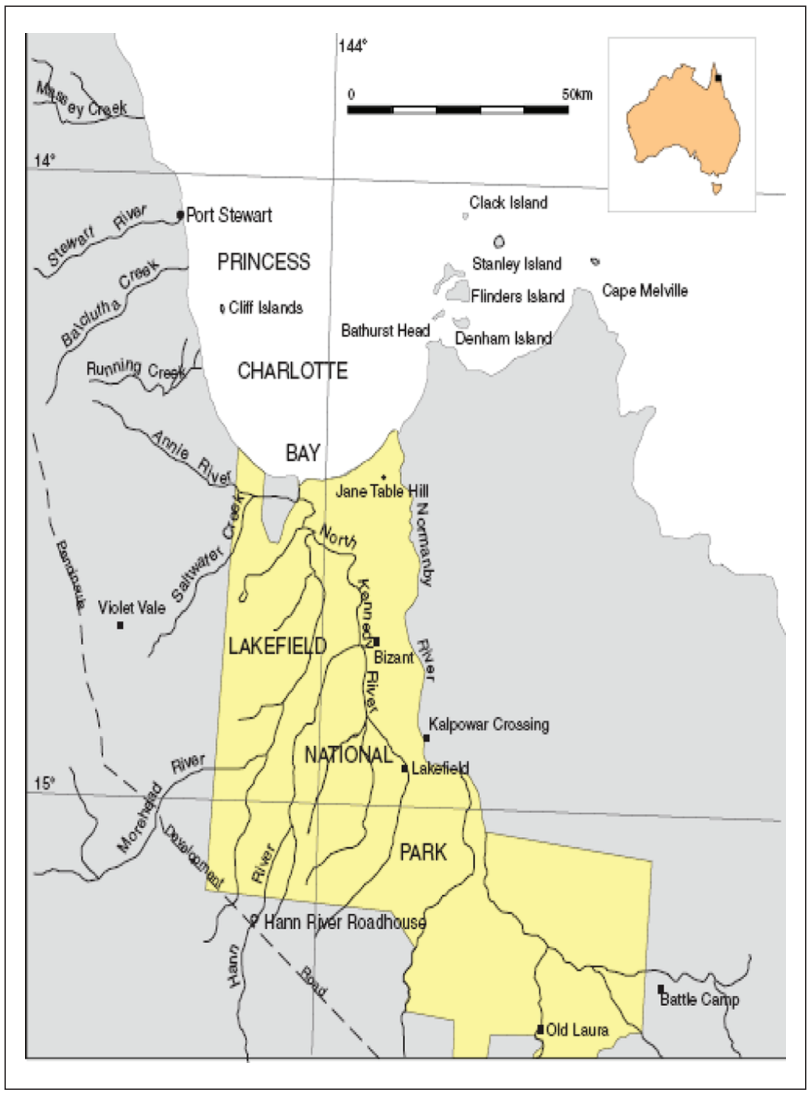

Figure 1. Cape York Peninsula indicating locations mentioned in text. © Arthur Cole. Reproduced with permission.

The research project

We began specific research with the Lamalama into their heritage in museums in 2006, well after most of the historical events just described had occurred. Our research was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. The Linkage grants scheme aims to create connections between researchers and industry, and in keeping with this the research involved a collaboration between the museum and academic sectors, bringing together museum curators, anthropologists and a filmmaker. Apart from Rigsby, the research team consisted of the

curators Lindy Allen and Rosemary Wrench (respectively, Senior Curator and Collections Manager, MV), the cinematographer Simon Wilmot and the author, also an anthropologist. Rigsby, Hafner and Allen had long-standing relationships with the Lamalama beyond the life of the project. Primary objectives included assisting the Lamalama to establish a more sustained relationship with the museum sector and to provide further input into the management of their heritage materials within it; creating an audiovisual record of the entire research process, which would then be available to the Lamalama for their own purposes of cultural education and intergenerational knowledge exchange; and documenting and understanding the role of memory and affect in their association with the materials collected by Thomson during field research in northern Australia from 1928 to 1937. The Thomson Collection includes photographic images and other materials from the many sites of his research, and those from Port Stewart, which Thomson visited on separate occasions in 1928 and 1929 (Rigsby and Peterson, 2005), were the focus of the research.

Over a four-year period, we proposed a schedule of visits to MV and SAM, as well as fieldwork in which we took selected items from the Thomson Collection up to Cape York Peninsula. In collaboration with the Lamalama, we established a Lamalama Steering Committee consisting of community members selected by them, who consulted with us about their participation in all research activities. The Steering Committee saw it as their responsibility to ensure that the widest group of Lamalama people interacted with the Thomson materials. Their decisions about who participated in museum visits and the process of viewing artefacts and images in museum and field were made on a number of separate criteria, including cultural knowledge, age, gender, health status, availability and previous experience with the collection. Thus, an individual who wished to participate in museum visits, but was not available or had poor health at the time or had visited on a previous occasion was likely to be passed over in favour of someone who was available or more suitable. For example, a young person who had been before, had little cultural knowledge, but demonstrated an enduring interest in the materials might be included in preference to a similar person with greater knowledge but less interest.

These decisions were part of what the Steering Committee saw as their major concern – the transmission of cultural knowledge – so in each group visiting the museums it was important that a balance was struck between those with knowledge and the authority to transmit it and those who were deemed most in need of acquiring it. We discussed our independent research goals with the Steering Committee and after these consultations arrived at agreement about the constitution of each of the visiting groups. With regard to the viewing of objects in the field, the same principles applied, but for the initial showing of artefacts in Coen in 2008 the Steering Committee asked that the objects be put on view to all Lamalama people in town at the time. Over the life of the project, a considerable number of Lamalama people were able to establish closer relationships with their heritage and with the curators who were responsible for it in the museum setting (Hafner, 2010). Through this consultative approach both community and research objectives were maintained, and filming took place at all project stages and locations. To date, the Lamalama have not sought permanent repatriation of any of the objects in the Thomson Collection, apart from copies of some images, and the participation of Allen and Wrench allowed for a more dynamic process of engagement, particularly with regard to interactions with the artefacts within and out of the museum context.

Figure 2. Men fishing at Yintjingga/Port Stewart. (Photograph: DF Thomson. Source: The Donald Thomson Collection, courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria, TPH 2959.)

Between 2006 and 2008 the Lamalama made several visits to the Thomson Collection in MV (Melbourne) in groups ranging from three to eleven people (Allen and Hamby, 2011). Additionally, a small group visited the Tindale Collection in the SAM (Adelaide) in 2009. On these visits they engaged and interacted with both objects and curators and shared their knowledge, discussing the materials from which artefacts were made, their purposes and how they should be stored. This provided curators with valuable information about their management and allowed the Lamalama visitors to participate in decisions about how this should occur. In all phases of the project, images from the Thomson photographic collection were viewed and discussed by the Lamalama (Figures 2 and 3). These black and white images were taken by Thomson mainly with glass plate cameras during his Cape York Peninsula fieldwork in the late 1920s (Allen, 2005). The images produced from the plates are of excellent quality and provide substantial information that can easily be read by the Lamalama – not only do they depict people individually and in groups, but also locations within Lamalama country that provide information about their collective past. In this context, we noticed a difference in Lamalama responses to images and artefacts, and I have previously ascribed this to their differing material qualities and how their viewers use them to think about or recall the past (Hafner, 2010). However, it is also useful to consider other possible explanations of Lamalama responses to the reintroduction of objects long held in museums.

Responses to the objects on country

As part of the project, Allen, Wilmot and the author took a selection of objects made from bush materials up to Cape York Peninsula in 2008, including baskets and bags made

Figure 3. Man and woman crossing river at Yintjingga/Port Stewart. (Photograph: DF Thomson. Source: The Donald Thomson Collection, courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria, TPH3057.)

from grass and string, a conch shell nose ornament, a woman's string apron, harpoon heads and rope used to hunt dugong, a knotted fish net, tools, including a bone drill and wooden mallet, ironwood resin used in the making of spears, and a child's spinning top toy (Hafner, 2010). All of these objects collected by Thomson were made for secular purposes and not associated with ritual activities. Harpoon heads and rope used in hunting dugong were manufactured by the people Thomson met at *Yintjingga*. His writing makes it clear that ritualised singing and charms were used in hunting dugong, but these practices related to the personal powers of the hunter, more than the tools used (Thomson, 1934). Thus, none of the objects reintroduced onto Lamalama country in 2008 were perceived as invoking ritual dangers, and in fact some people had discussed and handled the same objects in the MV storerooms on their earlier visits.

Figure 4. Lamalama women discussing Thomson images, Museum Victoria storeroom, Melbourne. © Diane Hafner.

The full repertoire of artefacts was first displayed for in-camera viewing by the Lamalama in a public building in Coen, then re-located to the 'schoolhouse', a vacant building on their outstation at *Yintjingga* at which we researchers camped for the duration of the fieldwork. The artefacts were therefore widely viewed by the Lamalama, both those residing in Coen and those living on the outstation. By comparison to their interest in the objects demonstrated on visits to the museum through willingness to discuss and browse among them (Figure 4) we found their interactions with the artefacts were more restrained in encountering them on their own country. By contrast, Allen's (Allen and Hamby, 2011) previous experience with other Aboriginal groups indicated we could have expected greater engagement with the objects once they were on country given its central importance for the Lamalama.

Land and the logic of connection

Much has been written about the significance of the land to Australian Indigenous peoples (see Jones and Birdsall-Jones, 2008; Tilley, 2006: 20). Harrison and Rose (2010: 252) have recently discussed Aboriginal relationships to the environment as a 'logic of connection', noting that Australian Aboriginal cultures do not posit 'undifferentiated webs of connection'. Rather, 'creation forms life into patterns of connection'. They further explain this relationship as expressing an ontology that challenges Western dualisms between nature and culture – one in which 'culture is everywhere' with no boundary between nature and culture, and 'no mind-matter binary' (p. 250). In such conceptualisations, the

world is understood to be 'full of sentient beings' only some of whom we, in Western paradigms, would understand as living and in which 'life and place combine to bind time and living beings into generations of continuities in particular places' (p. 250). As they note, in this context, heritage is 'a cross-species collaborative project'.

This indicates a relationship of shared substance, such that artefacts produced from materials within the country would be likely to be viewed consubstantively, expressing an indivisible link between the country and the individuals who produced them. We understood the objects we brought from the museum to be regarded by the Lamalama as imbued with some agency linked directly to their ancestors, known as the Old People, who as Harrison and Rose indicate are among those sentient beings no longer part of the mortal plane. In Lamalama belief, the Old People have numinous properties and are able to cross mortal boundaries and intervene in the social plane of the living. As such, they are an integral part of the logic of connection that binds living people to the world around them. Unlike Rose and Harrison, however, I am not aware that the Lamalama locate the same degree of sentience in natural elements such as rocks and dirt as they describe, although many aspects of the natural environment may be the location of powerful, supernatural entities.

The Old People and what is elsewhere referred to as Dreamings but known to the Lamalama as Stories are the primary guardians of the landscape, and they watch over the actions of the living. Located at specific sites and areas within their traditional country, their powers are far-reaching, and it is therefore incumbent on the Lamalama to ensure they care for their heritage in the museum environment as dutifully as they would observe customary rules on country. Within the museum environment, Lamalama elders were careful to ensure these relationships were heeded in the placement of objects in relation to each other; for example, they advised about the proper management of ritual materials and the appropriate placement or position of their own heritage materials to the artefacts of neighbouring people. If not appropriately stored, even in the museum environment, there could well have been negative consequences such as illness for the Lamalama, who would have failed in their role as caretakers. That is, the intentions of the Stories and the Old People are expressed through such artefacts, and in this singular sense they might be interpreted as capable of acting as agents within the material plane.

Lamalama responses to the images and objects while in the museum environment seemed to suggest they would demonstrate considerable interest in the artefacts once they were returned home. We could not predict the nature of this response, but speculated that it might be physical, or sensual, as well as affective. That is, we expected that people would want to touch and feel the objects (Edwards et al., 2006), perhaps demonstrate their manufacture or use to each other, comment on aspects of their production and talk about or indicate something of a visible sense of connection to them. In some ways, this was the case. Objects are, after all, sites of human meaning-making, particularly when they are understood as associated with personal or group histories. With regard to visitor responses to memorials, for example, Beckstead et al. (2011: 199) recently noted that material objects are 'not only products of certain mental representations (e.g. individuality, freedom, faith) but are essential in provoking and eliciting thoughts, imaginations, understandings, and feelings related to these concepts'. They further note that the materiality of objects can provide access to feelings that are normally inaccessible yet deeply

relevant, because they index other phenomena of perhaps social or historical importance, and ultimately work affectively. Josephs (cited in Beckstead et al., 2011) argues that feeling is a dynamic process located in the individual that may be powerful and overwhelming, or hidden in the background, embedded in the whole human being and susceptible to cognitive processes (such as terms to categorise felt emotions) that 'stabilize the flow of experience and feeling to make sense and construct meaning out of our lived and felt experience' (p. 199).

Beckstead et al. are interested in the way in which semiotic devices, including language, work to guide this flow of feeling within the environment, grounding their analysis in visitor experience of the Massachusetts Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its potential to affect visitors in a culturally prescribed way – one which encourages 'remembrance and mourning of individual and collective sacrifice' (p. 211). In this way, they suggest, it provides a 'perfect example of how societies create collective memories through material objects' in a mutually constitutive process.

Within the research team we have sometimes discussed whether the Thomson materials perform similar memorial purposes, at least for some of the Lamalama. Whilst I agree that material objects may assist in creating collective memories, and that human cognition of objects may be influential on those who apprehend or interact with them, the above statement, in isolation, seems to extend the idea of agency to objects, that is, to suggest they are intrinsically capable of intervening in the world, an idea critiqued in Barnard and Spencer (1996: 595) and more recently by Morphy (2009) in relation to Gell's (1998) *Art and Agency* as problematical and as confusing the phenomenological with the analytical:

> This is partly because the concept of agency – 'actions' caused by prior intentions (Gell, 1998: 17) – is applied both to humans and to the objects that they produce and interact with … as a theory of what kinds of things objects are, it poses certain problems. On the whole objects do not change themselves … What human beings think an object is capable of doing needs to be separated from that which it is actually known that objects can do. (Morphy, 2009: 6)

Morphy notes that it may only be necessary to know that a particular object is believed to have agency, but this situation must be 'explored ethnographically'. For the Lamalama, it is clear that the landscape is imbued with powers that influence human actions as part of the cross-species collaboration described by Harrison and Rose (2010), but they distinguish these powers from the material sense of the landscape itself. Thus the Wind Story Place is a site of considerable power, and there are strict rules for behaviour while there, but it is not the objective nature of the location itself that has what Morphy describes as 'agentive' power. Rather, strict behavioural rules need to be observed here because the Wind Story is a creator being of immense power and may otherwise choose to punish people who do not observe them. Ontologically, this principle applies to objects of all kinds. It is not the objects themselves that have the intention to act, but the ever-present entities within the landscape that may use objects as a vehicle to express their displeasure. For example, fishing lines must be 'warmed' appropriately (i.e. held over the smoke of an ironwood fire) before setting off for the day in order to acknowledge the power and moral authority of the Story and the Old People. Failure to do so is likely to

be observed by them and result in a poor catch. It is not the case that the fishing line acts in any agentive way to cause a poor catch. Similarly, the belief that other species share kinship with human beings is at the heart of Lamalama ideas about the 'proper' hunting and killing of animals for food – when dugong are hunted, killed and become edible as *minya* ('meat') it is recognised that they have given their life in order that *pama* ('Aboriginal people') might eat and therefore live. This is particularly expressed as the 'proper' way to kill and butcher such animals.

While this describes a relationship of shared life forces, the Lamalama nonetheless distinguish between the immaterial and the material planes. Stotz (2001) has, for example, described the way in which cars in a central Australian Aboriginal community are thought of at one level as having life force. Certainly Lamalama people at times speak affectively of cars as companions with characteristics of personhood, but they also clearly understand them to be machines that require mechanical maintenance in order to run. That is, any characteristics of personhood are separated from their functionality as utilitarian objects. Analytically, it must be said that it is not objects themselves that are understood as having agency or intention. Instead, in Lamalama belief it is the degree to which the supernatural powers in the landscape can be harnessed to human actions that creates a sense that any such objects are capable of intervening in the world. If a car does not run, ontological explanations may require that supernatural intervention be considered, but the failure of its owner to keep it 'alive' by filling it with petrol is also likely to be recognised. In this sense it is not the case that objects and actors are mutually constitutive; objects themselves do not have memories and emotions, but they may be invested with memories by people, or be the site of emotional attachment for the people to whom they have specific meaning.

As Edwards and Hart (2004) have demonstrated, images can be understood as objects with their own kind of materiality in which these same meanings may be invested. This influences the ways in which people will interact with and apprehend them. As well as containing traces of the past through perception of what is captured in the image, photographs are three-dimensional objects with an inherent materiality that allows them to be picked up, collected and owned as objects in their own right. This opens up interpretive possibilities. The past appears to take on an immediacy in the present, while the meanings invested in them shift across time, location and context, with new meanings developing with each shift.

We hoped therefore to be able to observe and record additional information of this kind on country, by taking artefacts back to their original setting in Cape York Peninsula. In doing so, we were aware they were being returned 'home' for the first time in nearly 100 years (Hafner, 2010) and thus re-introduced into a social world in which perception of them would include their status as museum objects. This, in turn, indicated their potential to be perceived as disconnected from their original purposes and the system of meaning and purpose by which the Lamalama live today. They had been ordinary objects of everyday use at the time Thomson collected them, but now as museum artefacts and part of Lamalama history, their sense of connection to them was likely to be ambivalent. Allen's (Allen and Hamby, 2011) previous experience with Yolngu people in Arnhem Land had been that they 're-claimed' similar artefacts and used them as a source of information in the contemporary production of ceremonial materials. Allen had therefore

witnessed Yolngu people establishing a sense of relationship between themselves, objects and the places in which they had been made. We therefore hoped to witness a similar situation, not least because Lamalama elders such as Sunlight Bassani hoped that would be the case. He believed a closer association with the collection would make a positive contribution towards strengthening Lamalama identity, by instilling a sense of pride in the vibrant cultural past it revealed. Yet by contrast, once on their home country, the objects re-introduced to the Lamalama did not produce similar expressions of connection among most of the people who viewed them. There were, of course, a few exceptions to this, notably one man who asked many questions about the artefacts when they were on view in Coen, but no one used the materials as inspiration for renewed cultural practices as the Yolngu did, and as Sunlight Bassani had hoped for.

Thomson's Lamalama images, which depict the parents and grandparents of contemporary senior people engaged in a variety of activities (see Figures 2 and 3), were already familiar to the Lamalama, both inside and outside the museum context. Rigsby had previously used the images in working with Lamalama people over a number of years, and many of the older people in particular were very familiar with them. In this project we introduced a wider range of images from among the more than 500 of specific relevance to them produced by Thomson (Allen, 2005). On visits to MV as part of the project, Lamalama people viewed both images and artefacts, and on field trips before our 2008 visit, the research team had worked exclusively on Thomson's images with the Lamalama. Their engagement with the images was markedly more dynamic than with the artefacts, as evidenced by more lively and engaged interactions with them in both museum and field contexts; both adults and children were interested in them and openly viewed and discussed them with each other. Figure 5 shows Lamalama people viewing images with Allen in the Bassanis' backyard in Coen on an earlier visit in 2005, and demonstrates something of this engagement: a mixed gender group consisting of several generations clearly engaged in viewing and discussing the images.

Their conversation at this stage of the research ranged from adults identifying long-deceased relatives to children, as in comments such as 'Look bubba, that one *pa'i* ['grandmother, father's mother'] belong you', to asking older relatives to identify specific people or places contained in the images. In some cases, older people discussed particular images, identifying for each other relatives whose faces they had forgotten in the decades since they had died, or linking events in their lives to information in the images. This sometimes involved drawing on us as researchers to provide an objective time frame – for example, about the temporal relationship between Thomson's visit and the Second World War. Major historical events of that kind allow people to fix their own history in time, and apply it to reading the localised information in photographs. The images provide an accessible visual record of change that allows the Lamalama to weave acquired information and experiential knowledge together into a discursive history that reflects their personal experience. The Lamalama read the Thomson images as historical and educational documents open to their own interpretation, and they alternatively express loss, pride, curiosity and incredulity when discussing them. Apart from comments made when working with us on the images, they are also keen to acquire and retain copies of them for private purposes of storage and display. For example, in 2008 one young woman took me into her aunt's home at Bottom Camp, one of the three residential

Figure 5. Museum Victoria curator Lindy Allen working with Lamalama people on Thomson images, Coen. © Diane Hafner.

areas at *Yintjingga*, to show me a large copy of a Thomson image depicting her grandfather, acquired after an initial visit to MV in 1990.

Landscape and the organisation of affect

Yintjingga is understood as the location of sacred places associated with creator beings, typically personified in natural features of the environment such as the moon or wind, but also as containing their collective history, signified by natural and man-made elements: places where ancestors are buried, trees where people were born, campsites, good fishing spots and a plethora of other associations both sacred and mundane. This landscape is not designed by human intention, as with a memorial, to physically, cognitively and affectively mediate individual or collective responses, although it can produce similar effects. We witnessed this during the 2008 fieldwork, when we made an overnight trip to the Lamalama Story or sacred place *Ngawal* with a group of ten adults and eight children.

One of the senior women spent the afternoon working on fibre bags, woven from materials gathered on country. Methodologically, this was the kind of situation we planned for: the opportunity to consult with people on country about the artefacts, given the direct relationship between current practice and past evidence. The museum artefacts included examples of the same type of fibre and a grass skirt from the 1920s. We had hoped to elicit relevant information about manufacture of artefacts as well as reflecting Sunlight Bassani's goal of inspiring a sense of cultural pride that

Figure 6. Lindy Allen with Lamalama people and Thomson artefacts on return trip to Yintjingga from Ngawal. © Diane Hafner.

might impact on the symptoms of their historical displacement – substance abuse, family and community violence, health issues and unemployment. Yet on this occasion people demonstrated little interest when we unloaded the crates of artefacts. During our return journey, we once again laid the artefacts out on tarpaulins on the ground (Figure 6), but there was again little general interest in them. We then visited another Story place, *Wayaamaw*, now a cattle dam, at the request of the senior woman present. Several people had never been there before and after a few moments I realised a number of them were standing silently with tears in their eyes, seemingly unable to speak. At a suitable time later, I asked one of these, a young woman, what she had felt. Her reaction was intensely emotional, and she found it difficult to express her sense of being overwhelmed by the opportunity to go there in the presence of her elders.

Her country has become the location of competing interests and uses, and entangled meanings. As Tilley (2006: 18) suggests, places constitute landscapes and spaces of personal and social identity. In this instance, the landscape was constituted of Lamalama meanings and values, historical associations including the recent deaths of a number of socially important individuals, and the imposed purposes of non-Indigenous pastoral interests. Thus, while this place has had other purposes imposed upon it as a part of the regional pastoral industry, it retains its power to intensely evoke the Lamalama past as well as point to a future in which they will regain full control and management of their land. In this sense, places within their country are perceived by the Lamalama as bound to them despite any changes wrought to them, or perhaps better, they are sources of

affective importance, in ways that either images from the past or objects made long ago from elements of their country and stored in distant museums do not retain to the same degree.

Agency, intention and context

Beckstead et al. (2011) clearly demonstrate the way the design of the memorial works to guide and develop affective responses, and this has prompted me to consider the degree to which purpose and intention guided responses to the objects discussed here. This was underscored by my observation of openly emotional responses at *Wayaamaw* and the corresponding lack of interest and demonstrated affect provoked by the artefacts. I earlier noted that Lamalama people requested we assist them to gain closer access to their heritage materials and also that Sunlight Bassani in particular hoped this would generate positive social change. His death during the project after a terminal illness meant that both we and the Lamalama were unable to benefit from his full participation and guidance throughout the project, but he asked that we continue with the research (Sunlight Bassani, personal communication, October 2007). As researchers, we did not wish to lead Lamalama responses to the materials, preferring to leave this open to them. This is not to say that we were completely open-ended about the project; more that we aimed for as collaborative a process as possible. The lack of very affective responses to the artefacts brought from the museum might therefore seem to indicate a lack of purpose around what it was we wished to investigate, but I do not think that is an accurate interpretation. Such an interpretation would indicate a lack of agency within the Lamalama themselves with regard to their status as research collaborators, and this was not the case. Rather, I think that context and location impacted on their differing emotional responses to all the objects discussed.

Harrison and Rose (2010) indicate that country is 'a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action and a will towards life' in Aboriginal perceptions, and this in part parallels my understanding of Lamalama beliefs about land: an 'eco-place' that speaks to a 'locatedness that is not human-centred and that is attentive to the many living things who participate in the life of a given place' (p. 258). In Lamalama views, people living and dead share the land with other forms of life, but these do not deliberatively choose to impose actions on the landscape to create specific memories or emotional responses. Yet despite the sentience of the landscape in Aboriginal perceptions, it cannot be said to be agentive of itself. The landscape is as it is, subject to human action and change, including the damaging acts of outsiders; a physical location, but also the reference point for all the most important aspects of their identity. Of itself it is without intention, but is the location, and indeed in some senses the creation, of beings such as the Story and the Old People, who may act through it to bring about events on the material plane.

When we took artefacts out of the museum and transported them to Cape York Peninsula we changed the context through which they were perceived by the Lamalama. That is, we removed them from their discursive location within the 'whitefella' world and temporarily placed them back into the exclusive domain of the Lamalama. This

poses the question of whether or to what degree we therefore increased or created the apparent emotional discomfort that I perceived as some kind of disconnection from the artefacts. This perceived disconnection needs to be examined in the context of Lamalama social relations. As a kin-based society, relationships between people are of central importance and defined by complex rules of behaviour that articulate with those that relate to the landscape and apply across all spheres of life. Re-introducing objects whose biographies were unknown, or only partially known in the case of the artefacts, posed challenges for the Lamalama in establishing an effective relationship with them. This is not to say they found the objects alien items; bags, spear heads and resin are still made and used, and are completely familiar objects. It is more likely that gaps of information about how they now fitted into the Lamalama world impacted on responses. As Allen and Hamby (2011: 220) note: 'Despite the wealth of documentation associated with the Donald Thomson Collection, the inevitable first question of whom does an object belong to remains problematic as relevant details are more often absent than present' – neither surprising nor unusual in ethnographic collections of this kind. Just as it is necessary to know how they are related to other people in order to know how to behave towards each other, a proper and full relationship with the objects requires overcoming gaps in information about them. The sense of connection described by Harrison and Rose (2010), among many others, indicates that a clearer understanding of their relationship to the makers of the artefacts would have increased connection to them in similar degree to the images, even if it could not rival the affective connection with country. This is, however, belied by the relative ease with which people interacted with objects within museum storerooms. Two separate events underscore this fact.

The first of these concerned the move of the objects from Coen to the schoolhouse at *Yintjingga.* Once there, a more senior female member of the Steering Committee brought a junior man and his partner (not a Lamalama woman) to view the objects. He was on a short visit back home after spending a period of some years in a southern town. In discussing the objects, he questioned whether they could be displayed again in Coen so he could view them once more before he left. She replied that they would stay at *Yintjingga*, where they were safe from prying and interference: 'People in town all the time gotta know Lamalama business!' Her comments indicated a sense of custodial responsibility towards the objects rather than an affective one, and spoke more about her existing social networks than the objects – a duty to protect both them and other Lamalama people from the curiosity they might provoke if it was known they were once again on display. Coen's population consists of a number of separate Aboriginal groups who might be provoked into being 'jealous' of the Lamalama by the presence of the objects, while their curiosity value to the white population was equally to be avoided. This woman was amongst those with greatest familiarity with the Thomson materials, but in this instance I interpreted her apparent ease in relation to the objects as related to her role as a custodian of Lamalama heritage objects rather than an expression of personal relationship to them.

The other incident of interest concerned Johnny Kulla Kulla, another senior man (now also deceased), who contributed to a broader discussion of the objects while they were at *Yintjingga* in 2008. He was at the time a resident of Bottom Camp, and together with a mixed family grouping that included his adult daughter and a son, as well as other relatives, we discussed with him one of the images of his father, Jimmy Kulla Kulla. Here

was a clear case of the viewer knowing his kinship to the maker, a man well-known and admired by older Lamalama people, but his interactions with the image were not discernibly different to those of the others present. In this case, the idea of disconnection between the viewer and the image was more difficult to interpret, but it would not be inaccurate to characterise Johnny's response as somewhere between indifference and idle curiosity. Johnny was the head of his family, with the right to speak on their behalf; he knew his relationship to the person depicted and to his other relatives present. This set the parameters for discussion. None of them had greater authority or, indeed, knowledge than he to talk about the image, but his responses when questioned about his feelings on once again seeing his father were minimal and largely uninformative about any sense of connection he experienced.

Conclusion

What these instances suggest is the need for broad consideration of the social contexts that apply in relation to working on ethnographic collections with Aboriginal people. It may be the case that people are able to socialise images more easily than artefacts, as I believe is part of the explanation of Lamalama responses. However, the act of re-introducing objects that are only temporarily present clearly did not provide the circumstances to allow them to be fully re-incorporated into the systems of meaning that have been established in their lengthy absence. While in some cases the Thomson images showed individuals making or using the very same artefacts that they viewed and handled on the way back from *Ngawal* or in the museum, in the Lamalama case images apparently have greater power to provoke questions and allow greater imaginative play. An object such as an axe head is evidence of actions in the past; an image of someone producing or using it provokes questions about that individual's personal history, location, social status, hunting abilities and so on, as well as providing, importantly, additional clues to potentially answer these questions or open them up for collective discussion. Rather than acting to close down expressions of collective remembering, they provide a forum for its expression. Overall, Lamalama responses to the images demonstrated precisely that – an opportunity to share in learning about and reconstructing the past in accordance with the information contained within them. Yet the example of Johnny Kulla Kulla's response to the image of his father cautions against making generalised assumptions about the power of any objects to provoke memory or affect. Our interest had been in creating the circumstances for a broad expression of collective remembering, as Sunlight Bassani had hoped. While we found people did engage with the processes of collective memory in relation to the images, this was nonetheless expressed less freely with regard to the objects.

My intention in this article has not been to suggest that museums denigrate the authority of cultural objects or to say that attempts to find innovative ways to connect people to their heritage are unproductive and to be discouraged. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate that if we are able to judge from affective responses, the cultural value of varying kinds of objects is relational, a product of the networks of connection and meaning between people and things. Lamalama responses to both images and museum artefacts differed from each other as being more or less engaged, depending on location, and the contexts of their engagement with them. Many of the Lamalama have requested copies of specific

Thomson images from MV and keep them in personal albums or as pictures on the walls of their homes. No-one has requested the return of the artefacts to date, from the Lamalama perspective partly because of concerns about their preservation, but also because they are museum objects, removed in place and time from their makers, and therefore from their descendants. Yet the historical relationship between them and the Lamalama is not denied, and the qualitative difference in response to the contexts in which they are encountered points to differences in affective connection.

For example, rather than keep the museum crates of artefacts in Coen, Lamalama people requested that we keep them at *Yintjingga*, a place safe from external interference. For the Lamalama, their biography, including lengthy sequestering within the museum, did not cancel the networks of relationship between them and the artefacts. Rather than provoke an intense or sustained emotional response, however, as both images and land are capable of doing, Lamalama perception of the artefacts in particular responded to changes in their context. Their very materiality, which of itself offers little in the way of clues about who had made, handled, owned or used the artefacts (given none of this was remembered by people today) meant the dynamism they contained as part of a greater collection of objects while within the museum was negated or changed. By comparison, the images show people engaged in activities in specific locations, which demonstrates their rights and therefore their social location under Lamalama tradition. The detail about people within the landscape allows contemporary Lamalama people to track their connections to them.

As demonstrated, even where the relationship to an object was known, establishing a connection to it was more problematic than it was to the information contained in the Thomson images. Figure 2 shows men engaged in fishing; in doing so, it also depicts the social relationships between them. Lamalama people are able to describe the kin relationships between the people captured in the image, as well as other information such as their specific location, who was the likely owner of the net and the time of year during which this event was occurring. Photographic images reveal relationships in a way that provides greater ease of connection to objects no longer part of the daily social terrain. This indicates the complexity of the relationship between objects, places and people, and underscores the importance of recognising that the value of objects as heritage resides in the social networks of the people who produce and invest them with meaning. The idea that objects, even ones with complex social biographies, are of themselves agentive in producing responses, ontological, affective or otherwise, cannot be sustained in this context.

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