

Aboriginal Exhibitions and Aboriginal Communities: Contemporary Curation in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary curation in Australia is made better if complicated by the call for Aboriginal consultation. Galleries and museums planning on exhibitions with Indigenous material should have policies in place to liaise with Indigenous communities about the best practice model for displaying cultural material. However, across Australia there is no single way of going about consultation with communities – curators must find their own way. This was made evident to me recently and quite poignantly when I was brought on board at the end of the exhibition development phase involving Aboriginal paintings at a major Australian institution. This article will demonstrate is that not only do institutions need to properly budget for the processes of consultation but they need a period of consultation to scope the involvement of Aboriginal stakeholders in the exhibition development process.

Keywords: Aboriginal consultation, Museum studies, Cultural protocols, Contemporary curation, Visual culture, Exhibition development

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of decades, there has been a greatly increased need for collaboration and consultation between museums and Indigenous communities (Harrison, 2013). This has been particularly important in relation to exhibitions where source communities of all kinds expect and now demand a say in how they and their culture are represented. “The utterly objective exhibition, like the completely unmediated photograph, is a phantasm” (Livingston et al., 1991, p. 105). Indigenous communities have a stake in an exhibition but it is only through museum initiated collaboration or consultation that they have a say. The difference between collaboration and consultation in both practice and definition is crucial and goes to the heart of Indigenous agency. Alaskan anthropologist and curator Ann Fienup-Riordan writes consultation is where “Native [sic] co-workers share information but final decisions remain in museum hands”, while “true collaboration... is the joint shaping of representation” (2011, p. 1). In Australia, this call for collaboration and consultation is strong but there are a number of hurdles well-meaning curators must go through in order to successfully involve source communities with the exhibition development process.

In Australia, collaboration and/or consultation are seen as essential for any exhibition to go ahead as proper maintenance of cultural protocols. The Australia Council for the Arts, Australia’s peak body for arts funding, has developed a series of publications specifically focused on the cultural protocols of dance, writing, new media arts and visual arts. The Council writes, “protocols define appropriate ways of using Indigenous cultural material, and interacting with Indigenous people and their communities. They encourage ethical conduct and promote interaction based on good faith and mutual respect” (Australia Council, 2007, p. 3). Following cultural

protocols assures an uncontested exhibition and prevents accusations of colonialism and cultural misappropriation. Knowing what these cultural protocols entail involves seeking advice and permissions from Aboriginal peoples and communities. Distance is no longer an excuse and when the Indigenous community is far from where the exhibition is to be held, there still exists pressure to collaborate and be involved. According to archaeologist Peter Stone, “it seems obvious that Native peoples and other minority or oppressed groups should be consulted on the display and interpretation of objects related to their pasts” (2005, p. 221). What it means, however, for a museum to collaborate or consult with a source community is different in every situation. Museums must create a flexible approach in their engagement with an Indigenous community that is designed around the specific cultural protocols of that community.

This paper describes a case study of museum consultation based on my experience at a major Australian institution. The purpose of this paper is not to name and shame – the specific details about the exhibition and institution will be omitted. I want to use this case study as a way of tackling Aboriginal consultation in Australia in general and to put forward concepts and ideas that any museum needs to bring to bear when exhibiting Indigenous material. Anthropologist Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Ramson Lomatewama write that what is more important is not names but roles (2013) and this paper will describe the various roles and responsibilities in contemporary curation in Australia. It is important to note that the exhibition could be any exhibition – the museum any museum. The case study will detail how the exhibition had gone from its initial lofty goals of collaboration, to its struggle to even conduct a bare-bones consultation, to the final result of simply having Indigenous representation at the opening. This paper will show the complexities of contemporary curation in Australia and the type

of hurdles curators face when dealing with an ad-hoc consultation plan.

2. THE CASE STUDY

The exhibition was one of the blockbuster events of the year for the museum and every department was involved in some way or another. I was hired on board as a curator but in less than two months after starting, I found myself the only curator on a major exhibition of Aboriginal paintings. Working with an external expert consultant, my position went from research and support to being in charge of the exhibition and more importantly liaising with source communities. There are two areas of interest that illuminate the major issues of contemporary curation. The first issue is the concept of community consultation and the second issue is museum awareness of Aboriginal culture and protocols. Through an examination of these issues, the process of how the exhibition went from 'collaboration' to 'consultation' to something else entirely will be demonstrated.

2.1 Scoping the Engagement

The exhibition covered three major regions in Australia and several individual communities. The geographical distance between the museum and the source communities was great, making any plans for engagement expensive. The original scope of the exhibition was ambitious and included visiting the communities from which the paintings were collected. The plan included sitting down with community members, showing reproduction prints of the paintings and eliciting stories and feedback about the significance of the works. It was a grand vision. At the time of my employment, none of that had happened and indeed, with six months until the launch, the time for any form of collaboration had truly passed because major decisions about the exhibition had already been made. All the paintings for the exhibition had already been chosen by a panel of academic experts, however, the list of paintings

had not been shared with the source communities. This was unfortunate. As Blackfoot elder Clifford Crane Bear writes "people that live, learn and inherit the stories of their grandfathers and grandmothers can show how items in museum collections and exhibits have meaning and a life of their own" (2011, p. 133). Instead of sharing the museum's collection of paintings with the community and asking cultural owners about the significances of the works, the museum went to academics to make those choices. It was a squandered opportunity. Exhibitions like this one do not happen often – indeed it was the first of its type at the museum. An opportunity to learn and share – give back to Aboriginal communities in ways that I will discuss later – was lost. There was scarce contact at all with source communities except in eliciting information about biographies of artists. In addition to the lack of reciprocity in exhibition development, the show was set to open and the marketing and public outreach departments were panicking about not having any representation from communities at the launch. "What would it look like," they asked in meetings, "having an Indigenous show with no Indigenous people present?" I was tasked to 'fix it'. Clearly, the concept of consultation was fading fast as well.

Indigenous communities in Australia exist all over the country, both in large urban centers and remote areas. The communities from which the paintings came from however are located in very remote regions that are typically cut off from major service centers during the wet season. Communication with these remote areas is tricky, not because of the lack of technology, although reliability is always an issue, but because these communities were generally understaffed and overburdened with requests and responsibilities. Most Aboriginal communities have an arts or cultural center and/or administration center from which business is conducted. These centers are overloaded with managerial duties including

housing, education, health, recreation, policing, infrastructure support, and a host of other tasks. Typically, art centers are understaffed in order to cut costs as funding is tight and often sporadic. To assume that important cultural business could be conducted over the phone or via email – when no one from these communities knew me – was folly. Additionally, the person on the other end of the telephone or email is typically a non-Indigenous person. Contacting these people was not consultation. To show the seriousness and commitment to a project or endeavor and to even speak with Aboriginal community members, cultural business in Aboriginal Australia must be conducted on country. Travel to these communities is expensive, as planes have to be chartered and special arrangements and permissions made. Initial contact was made through emails and phone calls but within the first few passes the message was concise: “come and meet with us”.

Despite the fact that the exhibition had initially been conceived as having a collaborative component, no budget had been made to facilitate any travel for consultation, let alone other activities. Scaling back the ambitious goal of going to each source community, a different tactic was required. Instead of community meetings, a meeting with the peak body – representing the regions involved in the exhibition – seemed the only solution. Art center peak bodies exist all over Australia and mediate in various ways between institutions and the art centers they represent. The peak body I was to meet was located in an urban center and would be a much cheaper and more feasible way of obtaining some form of community feedback and guidance. Even this version of consultation was problematic as no funding had been allocated. What happened next was a series of memos and requests justifying why a visit with the peak body was necessary when most people at the museum were sure things could happen over the phone or email. It was a laborious task to get the travel request approved and another

month passed before even this scaled-back form of consultation could begin. This labor-intensive task of obtaining the internal funding approval to meet with the peak body was indicative of several problems museums have with the collaboration and/or consultation process. From the museum’s side – coming mainly from marketing and public outreach – I had very explicit instructions.

- (1) I was to invite someone with a solid family connection to the exhibition.
- (2) I was to find someone who spoke clear English so that we could offer journalists someone to speak with.
- (3) I was to find someone who could perform during the launch – playing the yidaki (didgeridoo), clapsticks or sing.
- (4) If I could find a dance troupe, that would be the best.
- (5) I should find someone who painted and get them to do a demonstration for the public.
- (6) I should find some women to come down because there were not many women in the Exhibition and the museum needed to look like it was supporting Indigenous women.

The high expectations from various museum departments – just two months out from opening night – demonstrated a number of things. First, it does not demonstrate outright maliciousness or conscious racism. The people working on these projects honestly believed they were acting in good faith. These expectations, however, do demonstrate a lack of cultural knowledge about Aboriginal Australians. It demonstrates an underestimation of the importance of relationships within Aboriginal communities and an ignorance regarding the number of demands already in existence in those communities. There was a further expectation that I as the curator could ‘solve’ these gaps in understanding for the museum. As this was an impossible task for any one person to do, the result was that consultation had denigrated into a shopping list of an idealized Aboriginal representative. This was clearly not consultation

and I struggled to make something more positive come about. Right before I left, this 'wish list' was reiterated again. To say there was pressure to fulfill these requests is an understatement because in addition, the museum did not have the correct relationship with the peak body – nor the funding – to make all these things happen.

2.2 The Engagement

What was needed from the peak body was guidance. The exhibition covered a large region of Australia. I needed to sift through over a dozen communities and the families associated with the exhibition to see who would be the most appropriate representatives to come to the museum and help launch the exhibition. Help was needed to do this and this help could only come from the peak body. I also wanted to share this exhibition with the communities in some way and pave a way forward from the mess I had inherited. I brought to the meeting with the peak body a great many materials to share. I brought the exhibition design layout, the complete list of the paintings, the sample layout of the catalogue and the wish list of the museum. I admitted I felt awkward coming to them so last minute and with such ridiculous demands; I admitted to the peak body that this was not how I saw consultation or collaboration between source communities and museums. I asked if we could brainstorm some way of sharing the exhibition with community members and making notes about what the peak body expect to see from the museum.

I had assumed that the consultation with the peak body was going to be difficult because of the last minute nature of the meeting and the high demands from the museum. What surprised me was how much the peak body had to offer beyond what the museum wanted and beyond what I myself expected. The museum had created a wish list of requests but the peak body had seen such requests before and had a host of additional activities and possibilities to consider. For example,

it was suggested that an arts forum be developed to bring community artists to the museum and discuss the current painting practices. There were a number of performance groups that might have made the trip during the launch but with two months out from the exhibition opening, the timing was just too short to organize anything. The peak body challenged my conceptions of who would be potential candidates by expanding my notions of eligibility. Representatives who might come down need not only be family members of deceased artists but other artists who had culturally inherited the designs and stories exhibited at the museum. Finally, the peak body informed me of some of the trickier community politics that made some other potential candidates unsuitable. There were in fact, a number of ways source communities could engage and share knowledge and culture in conjunction with the exhibition but because it had been left so late, the reality was very different. I was highly excited and frustrated. The information being given to me was invaluable and the ideas opened new possibilities. I was frustrated that they were coming at such a bad time when I could only take on board a couple of suggestions. The meeting was highly fruitful though and many important lessons were passed on. It was explained to me that winter, and the lead up to winter, were extremely busy times. That the opening was in spring and I was visiting during winter meant that I was intruding during the heart of this busy time. Additionally, I was reminded that art centers are notoriously overextended and understaffed so any obligation the museum put on them needed appropriate planning time. Being asked to collaborate in an exhibition is not 'an honor' or a gift a museum bestows on a source community but a task. It might be an important task and one the community is keen to take on, but nothing can be accomplished without planning. The peak body stated that consultation for the opening night activities needed to start at least ten months before the exhibition was to launch.

Further, the peak body was frank in its evaluation of the visit. The tardiness of their involvement was perceived as a 'rubber stamping' of Indigenous participation in the exhibition development. Given that the exhibition was to open in two months, I could not – and would not – argue with that point. It was finally concluded in the meeting that there needed to be a community consultation plan that was implemented with input from the source communities, conceived of and operational a full two years before any Indigenous exhibition was scheduled to open. The peak body should have been involved in the start, making subsequent communication easier. The peak body outlined steps that would put me in touch with the key source communities that would be able to participate in the launch. I would be given emails of introduction so that my way was paved a bit more smoothly. I could rely on the peak body to facilitate travel arrangements and recommend chartered flights (with the museum footing the bill). Most importantly, I was informed about the cultural protocols of bringing artists down from communities, out of their comfort zone, when asking to speak to strangers about their culture and to 'perform' at the launch. Together, we were able to come up with an appropriate policy that not only accommodated the museums request but the needs of the Aboriginal guests.

Taking a community member out of their community means taking them out of any potential livelihood they might have. Most Aboriginal people living in remote communities are not salaried and their employment depends on several factors too complex to go into here. Needless to say, compensation for the loss of potential income was an important consideration for the peak body and I was made to honor the convention of speaker fees even if the people were not necessarily speaking. Being at the museum for five days, attending public events, being interviewed by journalists and making themselves available to the public demanded some form of compensation above and

beyond daily allowances for food. Working with the peak body, I was able to calculate appropriate amounts of compensation so that the fees would not be insulting nor too expensive but include a daily allowances for food, transportation and necessary extras as well as speaker fees.

When I left the meeting, I came way with the names of people – both men and women – who would be able and suitable to come to the museum to help launch the exhibition. I also came with a host of additional responsibilities that such activities demanded.

2.3 Museum Awareness

I had a number of tasks before me to bring people down from the communities to attend the opening of the exhibition. The next big hurdle for me was getting the museum to sign off on all the expenses. This meant communicating to the executive the importance of these expenses and why they were necessary. This was not easy. Archaeologist Rodney Harrison writes, "it is not only the curator or consultant or source community who interacts with the objects in collections and determines the ways in which they are managed and displayed, but a whole range of museum staff, visitors, and other agents within the museum meshwork" (2013, p. 3). This meshwork involves staff who are hired for their expertise in exhibition development, marketing, design, education and technical aspects such as video, web and lighting. None of these positions demand an expertise in Aboriginal Australia and yet each department engages at some point with the exhibition. Navigating all these levels of expertise and awareness – and the lack thereof – was a challenge, as the wish list clearly demonstrated.

One of the key problems I faced after the meeting with the peak body was getting a commitment for the funding I needed to bring people down: airfare, travel allowances and speakers fees. Travel was difficult because I had to arrange for bush

taxis to pick up people from their homes and take them to the grass airstrips common in remote areas. I then had to charter flights to major cities to get them to the museum. I estimated these costs and sent requests to museum executive but during this time I kept getting requests from public outreach and marketing: who's coming? Have you confirmed your guests? In reality, I had not even invited people yet. Why not?

This was a serious point of confusion. I could not invite people to come down, I said time and time again, if I did not have the funds to pay their way. The museum was hoping for other avenues of funding for the expenditures. They would not commit to paying for people to come down. The museum was waiting on partnership answers from major airlines. They were waiting on their grant writer to submit paperwork. Two months out from the exhibition and the museum still did not want to commit to the fees required to bring community members down. I was unsure how to invite people down with the museum's commitment to the endeavor clearly in question. Museum staff did not understand how inviting people on a 'maybe' basis was not only culturally inappropriate but fundamentally rude as well.

Furthermore, it was clear to me that the museum did not understand the audacity of the requests in the first place. The Aboriginal artists the peak body recommended to me all had mobile phones but it was highly inappropriate for me to just ring them up. I had to go through the community centers as the people working there typically knew the schedules and public demands of artists and cultural leaders these centers represented. Two months prior to the exhibition, I was to contact community centers without notice and ask if 'maybe' people could 'potentially' come down 'if' the museum had the funds to 'hopefully' fund their travels. This was not the conversation to be had and I explained this in detail in my internal correspondences. The proper way to go forward

was to invite people to attend the opening and represent their community. In the end, the grants and partnerships fell through and the museum signed off on the expenditure to bring people to the opening. I was able to make the calls as acts of invitation instead of half-measured gestures.

Ultimately, what I have described are some of the problems around museum consultation methods with source communities. It requires funding. It requires patience. It requires good, solid relationships. It requires a willingness to give up power and control. It requires knowledge of cultural protocols and the complexities of Indigenous life. It requires a lot of hard work.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

With all the work that goes into even a scaled-back consultation, there are many reasons why the process of working with source communities is so important to undertake. There are two main reasons for including collaboration and consultation in the exhibition development phase. Firstly, these methods are beneficial for the holding institution in recording and understanding the contemporary context and knowledge base of the objects in question. Secondly, collaboration and consultation limits the potential backlash that can happen from source communities if objects are displayed improperly or proper permissions are not obtainable. However, in order to achieve any goal or to maintain healthy relationships with Indigenous communities, museums must develop a policy that helps curators and general staff navigate the cross-cultural complexities.

Collaborating with Aboriginal communities acknowledges a demographic of society that is typically ostracized from spheres of influence. Collaboration recognizes that exhibiting objects benefit the museum (e.g. ticket sales, gift shop proceeds, etc.) and this benefit is at the expense of communities who rarely see such profits from

their culture. It is correct that in such exhibitions where the museum stands to see a monetary profit, some reciprocity is required. But even if the museum refused to see this perspective, there are still other benefits from engagement with Indigenous communities.

Museum collection records are typically in various stages of quality, having been collected over many decades if not centuries and through the lens of different historical understandings. Museum collections are “situated and contextual rather than inherent” (MacDonald, 2011, p. 2). What an object means or represents changes through time and it is important to building “strong, sustained, and mutually beneficial relationships with source communities” in order to understand these situations and contexts (Buijs & van Broekhoven, 2011, p. 11). Crane Bear and Zuyderhoudt write:

Objects may evoke a meaning that is shared among many people in the source community, but they may also mean something unique or different for each person asked. The maker of the object may have had special intentions for what the object should represent... This meaning may or may not have been documented at the time the object was collected (2011, p. 133).

Objects in museums need engagement if they are to live. They need to be held, touched and present during the telling of stories and the singing of songs. During the course of the exhibition, I had the pleasure of escorting two groups of Aboriginal people to the viewing rooms to document their stories and to try unite objects with families. One of the many recommendations made by the peak body was the need to make any community visits two-way in nature. The museum was asking and taking but avenues for giving needed to be developed. Curators Cunera Buijs and Laura van Broekhoven call for “knowl-

edge repatriation” and define it as “returning information in the form of documentation such as pictures, statistics, documents, and archives that were once collected for scientific administrative or other purposes of the community from which it originated” (2011, p. 11). For these reasons, arrangements were made to take people to the storerooms of the museum to view more paintings particularly connected to their communities and families. Additionally, forms of digital and visual repatriation were developed to facilitate some kind of reciprocity. Digital and hard copy images of paintings, artists and materials were arranged to hand back to individuals, as well as hard copies of the exhibition catalogue to each community represented in the exhibition. The catalogues were gifts from the museum’s exhibition department who had the budget to pay for the books and were sympathetic to what I was trying to do. There were several allies within the museum who believed more could be done. Museums have a responsibility to help make these kinds of activities happen and in doing so, reap some additional benefits through the process of knowledge sharing and filling in gaps in the museum records.

Finally, consultation is crucial because it is folly to think curators and academics know everything. When the community members came down for the exhibition launch, I took them through the exhibition. Walking through and examining the paintings brought up some key observations. Two paintings in particular were mislabeled. One painting had the incorrect moiety attributed to the subject matter. One painting misidentified the two fish that were the subject. Even though the expert consultant identified each of these paintings and was assured of their correct labels, the knowledge of the Aboriginal artists was quite different. “Curators working only with the “basic material” of objects risk isolating these objects from the stories they are part of and that they may refer to” (Crane Bear et al., 2011, p. 135). A

deeper look at the records indicated that the fish were mislabeled. Additionally, another call to a different consultant confirmed the misnaming of the other painting. When I asked about the confirmation of the spelling, I was told to ask the Aboriginal artist for his approval of the spelling. I did ask the artist and the labels were finally changed according to the artists' instructions.

Without collaboration and/or consultation, museums are in danger of presenting cultures as frozen in time and without contemporary ties to Indigenous societies. Objects will have lost their dynamism and life without some form of consultation. As Crane Bear writes, "in the museum world when you go to that [exhibition], the people that know everything are the anthropologists, or archaeologists. They make the signs and get everything what they need to get their answers. If there is no written proof, then it doesn't exist" (2011, p. 134). Museums must make way for Indigenous knowledge systems.

The exhibition I worked on went from collaboration to consultation to something else. Having Aboriginal guests visit during the launch is tokenism at best. One of the key difficulties I experienced in working on this exhibition was the lack of an official museum policy on their approaches to Indigenous exhibition development. When I sat down with the peak body, I was asked, "what's the museum's policy?" and I had no answer. The peak body had worked with the museum on several other occasions and indeed other projects that were going on in tangent to mine. I asked them if they had ever seen such a policy statement from the museum before and was told no. Without a formal policy, curators at museums are forced to go through ad-hoc procedures and these kinds of methods do nothing to develop long-lasting relationships with Indigenous communities. It is not my belief that every exhibition needs collaboration – the museum needs some leniency to scope exhibition development. However, con-

sultation is crucial no matter the scale or scope. This exhibition had no consultation. Creating an institutional policy that gives solid guidelines so that exhibition planners – curators, design teams and the like – can actually have a framework within to work is the best solution.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is an old but persistent museum fallacy that objects speak for themselves, and that the task of the curator is limited to presenting the object in as aesthetic, tasteful and ideologically neutral a fashion as possible for visitors to interpret the objects for themselves. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 49)

Developing exhibitions based on Indigenous material is complex. There is no guarantee that a single institution will perform perfectly and indeed, that should not be the expectation. Museums should approach their development phases critically and attempt to mitigate and lessen the levels of critique that can be leveled at them – not just to stay in good standing with the public but to insure that future collaborations and consultations with Indigenous communities can continue to happen. First and foremost, institutions should develop and produce policies for developing Indigenous exhibitions. Following a well-developed policy helps maintain healthy relationships, prevents accusations of misconduct, and reduces errors in labeling, juxtapositioning of objects, and orientation. There are several recommendations for ensuring a comprehensive but flexible policy. Policies should include budgeting for consultation, a stakeholder analysis, a resource analysis and schedules to brief staff on the cultural protocols particular to the exhibition.

Budgeting for a consultation or collaboration process is crucial and is based on developing a solid scope for the overall project. The project team needs to decide how much control they are

willing to give up in the exhibition development process to Indigenous source communities. Museums need to commit to spending the money. All Indigenous exhibitions require consultation and museums should have collaboration as their ultimate goal. Simply developing an exhibition and putting Aboriginal material culture on display without any input or feedback from the communities from which those materials are sourced puts the museum back into a nineteenth colonialism mindset. It is simply unacceptable in this age.

The targets of the consultation need to be defined as well and doing a stakeholder analysis of who is appropriate to involve is necessary. This is not always straightforward as there will be people who want to be involved who may or may not be deemed appropriate by others. In Australia, communicating with art center managers and peak body representatives can help alleviate these issues to some extent. Another way of aiding the process is to do a resource analysis of key academics, anthropologists, and art historians who have worked in the targeted areas. These people will typically have a handle on the community politics at play. Once all the players are selected and invited to participate, a plan of consultation and/or collaboration can be formulated.

A module of best practice should be raising awareness around "... the consequences of such problems as poor communication among staff, failure to adapt to sudden changes in the external environment, pressures to "dumb down" content to meet arbitrary profiles of the "average" visitor, and shortfalls in funding" (Phillips, 2012, p. 21). With this in mind, I suggest that regular briefings to museum staff about the cultural protocols and restrictions around cultural objects be communicated. Such briefings will not always avoid the creation of 'wish lists' but can go some ways to mitigate ignorance of cultural protocols. Additionally, museums in Australia tend to err on the side of a pan-Aboriginal culture, limiting

the practice of cultural protocols to a narrowly defined set of standards. The anthropologist Howard Morphy writes about a "culture of protocols" that acts as an interface between "Indigenous cultures and government and cultural institutions" (2014, forthcoming). Pan-Aboriginal protocols cannot replace communication with particular communities. As Stone point with regards to his discipline, "if these professionals cannot work with and appreciate the beliefs and feelings of those that they often most directly affect, then what hope is there of changing the common charge that archaeology is simply a self-indulgent pastime?" (2005, p. 223). For the context of museums, it is the charge of colonialism - colonialism of ideas, objects and stories - that collaboration and consultation work to avoid. As soon as institutions fall back on a single method of engagement with Indigenous communities, there will be problems. It is hard work and demands an attention to detail and a dedication to the endeavor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A big thank you goes to Marianne Riphagen for reading a draft of this article. Her comments were invaluable. I would also like to thank Howard Mophy for supplying me with a preview of his article on open access versus cultural protocols. Thanks also go to the anonymous reviewer who provided sound direction and commentary. A warm thank you goes to Jilda Simpson for many stimulating conversations and for allowing me to raid her library. All errors and omissions however are my own.

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