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Looking Through Windows: using multimedia to capture Aboriginal people's memories and stories.

Looking Through Windows is a multimedia exhibition about the removal, dispossession and 'protection' of Aboriginal people in the New England and Northwest regions of New South Wales Australia.

Combining artwork, oral histories, language, music, film and photography the exhibition captures stories of what it was like to live 'under the Act' on missions, reserves and on the fringes of society. To share experience's of removal to places like the Cootamundra Girls Home or the Kinchela Boys Home. Together old art forms and new technologies show how language, culture and histories can be preserved, reclaimed and passed onto new generations.

Through the Looking Through Windows project Aboriginal Elders and community members gathered together to share stories, to reconnect to family, to Country and to begin/complete their journey of healing from the legacy of inter-generational trauma of removal.

These gatherings provide a culturally safe place to listen to our Elders and community members' stories and by doing so, we are Looking Through Windows into the past, only to see our stories reflected back at us. This is an example of some of the installations in the exhibition that invites people to look at themselves, their histories and cultures – to rediscover, reclaim and reconnect to their history and culture.

Sadie Heckenberg

Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

Nothing About Us Without Us

Indigenous oral history brings life to our community narratives and portrays the customs, beliefs and values of our old people. Much of our present day knowledge systems rely on what has been handed down to us generation after generation. Oral history enables this continuation even when our Elders have past. The transmission of knowledge through intergenerational exchange, creates a research fabric which privileges a focus on Indigenous methodologies and ways of being. This paper will explore culturally safe spaces within oral history research that allow for deep sharing of story, emotional connectedness and connection to culture. From an Indigenous and Wiradjuri perspective the research further explores cultural safety and how we can protect Indigenous spoken knowledge through intellectual property and copyright law.

This research journey looks broadly at the landscape of Indigenous oral history both locally and internationally from my own Wiradjuri cultural identity. Our ways of being and doing is centered by Yindyamarra, "Respect, be gentle, polite, honour, do slowly", (Grant and Rudder, 2005, p.335). This Wiradjuri methodology is not only a way of conducting research, but a way of living. The process of gaining knowledge itself must be respected but so must the people, the land, the rivers and animals that also share in these oral histories. Through the power of Yindyamarra this a journey of exploration into maintaining and strengthening ethical research practices and provides a model to safeguard our traditional knowledges.

Varpu Lotvonen

University of Alaska Fairbanks, USA

Alaskan Sámi narratives

In 1894, the U.S. Government hired Sámi people from Kautokeino, Norway, to teach reindeer herding to Alaska Natives. The Sámi people came to Alaska in two groups, the first one in 1894, and the second in 1898. The Sámi herded government reindeer with Alaska Native apprentices for the duration of their contracts with the government, and many of them established their own herds, becoming independent herders after their service. However, in 1937, the Reindeer Act ceased reindeer ownership by non-Alaskan Natives, thus putting an end to the active involvement of Sámi herders with the Alaska Reindeer Project. My PhD research is set to look at the fragments of knowledge pertaining to the experiences of the Sámi. First hand Sámi interpretations of this history exist only in fragments: In personal diaries, in photographs and reports of the U.S. Government officials, and in three oral history interviews found from the Alaska and Polar Regions Collections & Archives. They were conducted in the 1980s with second-generation Sámi immigrants, and they vary from recording quality and interviewer's focus and technique. My presentation discusses these three interviews. I will look at the personal and shared narratives for information that they provide about Sámi lives in the multicultural environment that characterizes Alaska between 1898 and 1937, and for the themes of nostalgia embedded in the narratives. The interviews provide unique insights into Alaskan history from a Sámi perspective, and to Sámi culture and human-animal relations as they developed in Alaska.

Riikka Patrikainen

University of Eastern Finland, doctoral student, Finland

"What was done that the deceased would stay in the grave and not come back home?" – Karelian death rites as "collected" by folklorist U. T. Sirelius from Matjoi Plattonen in 1920

This paper addresses the perspectives of collecting folklore in early twentieth-century Karelia by discussing the interview conducted by folklorist U.T. Sirelius with a lamenter specialist Matjoi Plattonen (1843–1928).

Born in Suistamo, the region called Border-Karelia, Matjoi Plattonen was a living representative of a tradition of customs and beliefs that were exceedingly interesting to scholars of folklore at the time. One reason for her popularity as an informant was her ability to answer delicate questions about death to which other informants refused to speak. Plattonen became especially famous as a lamenter to the Finnish audience in the 1920s, due her many years' of collaboration with ethnomusicologist A. O. Väisänen. Through Väisänen, Plattonen met folklorist U. T. Sirelius (1872 – 1929) who interviewed her in 1920, using a 211-part questionnaire concerning the customs and beliefs related to birth, childhood and death. The material that Plattonen and Sirelius produced together in this interview has been widely cited in Finnish research in the past century, yet the name of Plattonen is rarely mentioned with the data.

On the basis of this material, I argue that the idea of simply "collecting folklore" from Karelia understates the dimensions of the action. When Plattonen met Sirelius, two different worlds encountered: an illiterate Orthodox woman from the Karelian periphery met an educated Lutheran man from the capital city. Sirelius's fixed questionnaire can be seen as a prescriptive frame for the interview. Was the informant heard and understood as a representative of her environment and culture, or as a representative of the presuppositions of Finnish scholars?

Lorraine Weir

University of British Columbia, Canada

Toward a Compositional Practice of Transcription: "Lha Yudit'ih (We Never Give Up): An Oral History of the Tsilhqot'in Title Case"

This paper draws on my experience of working since 2013 on a book-length oral history of the precedent-setting Tsilhqot'in Indigenous rights and title case with the Plaintiff, Chief Roger William, and his community, Xeni Gwet'in (located in the southern interior of British Columbia, Canada). I document some of the challenges arising from the selection of a non-Indigenous, university-based researcher to collaborate with Chief and community on a project which began by recording the Plaintiff's narrative of the case and expanded to include all community members who wished to record for the project.

From the beginning, Lha Yudit'ih was to be a book and the recorder a non-Indigenous outsider whose explicit task was to do the work of crosscultural translation required to communicate with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers while creating a lasting record for the community. The scale and challenge of transcription, funding, academic politics, and the kinds of stories which people wished to share have taken me down paths of cultural knowledge, responsibility for community representation, friendship and transformation which I could not have anticipated in 2013 and which now saturate the manuscript in its final stages of production.

This project is the basis of my critique of much recent work on transcription and my outline here of a Tsilhqot'in compositional practice of transcription rooted in culturally-specific concepts of time which shape the narratives of Lha Yudit'ih and challenge the writer to disrupt the conventions of English grammar and syntax in order to be faithful to the spoken word. Seeking not to transgress the operations of Tsilhqot'in English but to hold them up, this compositional practice focalizes these indissoluble elements of the community's narrative while organizing the legal story within the timeless narrative of the coming to be of the land and the people.

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Yarning: An Indigenous Feminist Analysis of Oral History

Yarning, a form of storytelling, is a significant feature of knowledge transmission within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in Australia, particularly between women and children. Children learn through yarning and observation of their environment, predominantly transmitted by women – mothers, grandmothers and aunties. Oral dissemination is dictated by an extended kinship relationship that confers responsibility for story telling on extended family members, such that grandmothers, mothers and aunties (whether directly related or not) have responsibility for passing on important knowledge systems. This is yarning.

Yarning today is situated in a global and digital world, so what does that mean for Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems of knowledge transmission? The processes of the oldest living cultures in the world (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures) can be educational for the future.

A yarning culture practiced for tens of thousands of years ensures the art of listening and telling was, and continues to be, embedded within the Australian Aboriginal female psyche. Oral history methodologies hold many commonalities with the yarning that is so deeply rooted in Indigenous culture. For example, both involve a narrative shared between people in an intimate environment and both involve the protocols of trust, reciprocity and respect.

In this paper we explore the relationship between Indigenous yarning and oral history theory and practice by Indigenous women today for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. Furthermore, we question whether the world needs to embrace traditional Australian Indigenous oral historical methodologies in addressing a sustainable future.