

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Museums and Social Governance

Professor Tony Bennett and Dr Fiona Cameron of the Institute for Culture and Society, together with international research collaborators from the U.K., U.S.A. and New Zealand are studying the roles of early 20th century museums in culturally diverse societies. This project is funded by the Australian Research Council through its Discovery Projects grants scheme.

'Museums are known for being keepers of anthropological history and they are also among our most trusted cultural institutions' says Professor Bennett. 'But in colonial times in Australia, museums were also associated with how colonised populations were governed by influencing public and governmental ideas about cultural difference, particularly between indigenous and colonial Australians. This relationship was also occurring in other colonies around the world and used as means to relate with, but also control, both the colonial and indigenous populations. The information that museums held and disseminated to the public and policy makers was informed by the fieldwork of anthropologists and scientists at the time. We will conduct a comparative international study of the role played by anthropology museums in the cultural governance of both colonial and metropolitan populations in the first half of the 20th century. Among other things, we will explore the parallel developments occurring at the time and how museums were becoming more involved in population governance. More broadly, we ask how has this history influenced the politics of difference in contemporary Australia?'

The team will consider Australian, New Zealand, French, British and North American museums mainly through archival research, research workshops, and a major international symposium. Their work is guided by an Australian Indigenous Advisory Committee and a New Zealand Indigenous Reference Group.



Baldwin Spencer seated with the Arrernte elders, Alice Springs, Central Australia, 1896. Photographers W. B. Spencer, and F. J. Gillen. Photograph courtesy Museum Victoria. XP14279.

By exploring the role of museums in the early 20th century and their relationship to anthropological and scientific research at the time, new theoretical and methodological approaches will be developed relating to their roles in past society. This has implications for the role of museums in relation to the governance of cultural differences in contemporary Australia and internationally.

Project Title: Museum, Field, Metropolis, Colony: Practices of Social Governance

International Research Team:

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