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Nineteenth-Century Studies

Decolonising Museum Collections? What's In It for Origin Communities? Leah Lui-Chivizhe

While decolonisation points to a specific world-historical moment most strongly tied to the disappearing of empire as a political form, it speaks also to the process of the stripping away of colonial power, language and knowledge in the systems and institutions that reified and sustained empire.¹ Described as 'active tools of empire' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, museums venerated and endorsed 'Eurocentric and racialised ideals and narratives' that reflected the 'disciplinary logic of the imperial state'.²

Throughout the nineteenth century the 'collecting' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the things they made and used was a thriving industry. Traded and circulated globally objects and Ancestors were displayed at international fairs and institutions of empire, framed as curiosities and evidence for the justification of genocidal practices, dispossession and racialised oppression of colonialism. In the 21st century our things sit silent in display cabinets and more often in storage or perhaps they are hidden away after the 1980s cultural turn foreshadowed their updated museum identities as secret/sacred objects. So, what can decolonisation mean for the things and Ancestors that were taken? What can it mean for the communities or places they once came from?

In this workshop, nineteenth century collections of Torres Strait cultural material, natural history specimens and Ancestral remains will be the base from which we consider how decolonising practices in collector institutions can confront the past and benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and futures.

Historian and curator, **Leah Lui-Chivizhe** is a Torres Strait Islander with enduring family connections to the eastern and western islands of Torres Strait. Her research focuses on how nineteenth-century collections from the region can be useful for reconnecting Islanders with our pre-colonial histories of human and more-than-human relations. She also teaches in Indigenous histories at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Please send a 250-word expression of interest to Leah.Lui-Chivizhe@uts.edu.au by 1 February 2023.

¹ Jansen, J C and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: a short history*, Princeton University Press, (2017).

² Giblin, John, Imma Ramos, and Nikki Grout. "Dismantling the master's house: thoughts on representing empire and decolonising museums and public spaces in practice an introduction." *Third Text* 33, no. 4-5 (2019): 471-486.