Honours Research Proposal

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Understanding cultural material: Ngarrindjeri weaving in South Australia's Coorong region.
Provisional Title:

*Understanding cultural material: Ngarrindjeri weaving in South Australia's Coorong region.*

The Question:

How are woven materials such as baskets and mats significant to the Ngarrindjeri people, and does acknowledgment of this significance occur in museums and in the literature? This thesis will examine the ways in which Ngarrindjeri woven materials are interpreted by non-Indigenous institutions such as the South Australian Museum, and whether or not Ngarrindjeri perspectives are included in these interpretations (Hemming 2003: 67). As museums are now seen as “interpretive centres rather than the keepers of the past” (Bell 1998: 439), it is important that Indigenous peoples have input into how their cultures are represented, as misunderstandings can have serious repercussions, as demonstrated by the Hindmarsh Island Affair (Saunders 2003: 60).

Significance and/or innovation:

This study seeks to address a deficiency in the literature concerning Indigenous woven materials, in particular what, if anything, is excluded in the interpretations of non-Indigenous researchers. Some research has been carried out on Arnhem Land weaving in the Northern Territory (see Hamby 2001), but very little has been carried out within South Australia.
The importance of the weaving process to Ngarrindjeri people was an integral theme in anthropologist Diane Bell's book *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be* (1998). This book is a largely ethnographic account of Ngarrindjeri culture, as told by Ngarrindjeri people living in the Coorong. In particular, it discusses the exchange of knowledge and the continuation of culture enabled by women coming together for the purpose of weaving. However, her approach was anthropological, and therefore not concerned with the end results of the weaving process, namely the woven materials themselves, the significance of various shapes and styles, and the ways in which they are represented within museums. Bell herself recommends that more work be done regarding the significance of structure and styles of Ngarrindjeri woven materials (Bell 1998: 88). This aspect of weaving will be included within the scope of this thesis.

The notion of weaving as a form of cultural resistance was also raised in Bell’s study (Bell 1998: 86), and will be discussed further in this thesis as an aspect of the significance of weaving to the Ngarrindjeri. During years spent living on the mission, weaving was perceived as an activity that would encourage assimilation, as well as an “antidote to idle harts becoming the devil’s plaything” (Bell 1998: 86). Due to the missionaries’ approval of weaving as an activity for women, this allowed women to come together and share knowledge away from surveillance, as they were permitted to collect the necessary materials without supervision.
(Bell 1998: 86). The idea of weaving as a form of cultural resistance has only been touched upon in existing literature, and will be explored as an aspect of the overall significance of weaving to the Ngarrindjeri people.

This thesis will contribute to the wider debate regarding museums and the lack of Indigenous inclusion in the decisions made regarding the portrayal of their own culture (Sculthorpe 2001: 80-81; Hemming 2003: 67; Specht & MacLulich 1996: 27). As this study focuses on the Ngarrindjeri, the South Australian Museum will be the major focus of discussion concerning these issues. The quality and diversity of woven materials created by the Ngarrindjeri people have long been sought after by members of the public and museums alike (Hemming et al. 2000: 21; Jenkins 1979: 214). As a result, the South Australian Museum has a considerable collection of woven material made by the Ngarrindjeri (Hemming 2005, pers. comm. 25 October). This collection will form part of the basis for not only the material analysis of woven material, but also the comparison between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interpretations of material culture.

Design and Methodology:

In order to answer the question on which this thesis is based, primary and secondary sources will need to be consulted. Pending ethics approval, interviews will be conducted with Ngarrindjeri people in order to learn about the history and significance of woven material. This would form an
invaluable resource for research, as there is little in the written record from which to gain information. This project has been discussed with the Ngarrindjeri community, and they are supportive of it.

The South Australian Museum’s collection of Ngarrindjeri baskets and mats will also be accessed during the course of this research. Comparisons will be drawn between the ways in which this collection is represented, and that of the museum at Camp Coorong, which is maintained by the Ngarrindjeri people.

Secondary sources will also be utilised, particularly concerning ethnographic research (Bell 1998; Jenkins 1979), museum studies (Specht & MacLulich 1996; Hemming 2003; Sculthorpe 2001), mission life (Lydon 2003; Lydon 2002; Brock & Kartinyeri 1989), and other examples of cultural resistance.

**Literature Review:**

As there is little literature concerning the practice of weaving and the significance of woven materials to Ngarrindjeri people, the best source in the literature is Bell’s work *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be* (1998).

The discussion regarding weaving as a form of cultural resistance will draw on examples that have been previously documented in the
literature, such as Jane Lydon’s work on photographs and the placement of living quarters at Coranderrk Station in Victoria (Lydon 2003; Lydon 2002), and Barry Morris’ work on the use of gambling to resist assimilation by the Dhan-gadi in New South Wales (Morris 1988). In particular, research conducted into the history of African-American slavery has provided many examples of cultural resistance that can be utilised in this study (Stine et al. 1996; Garman 1998).

Literature discussing the ways in which Indigenous material is portrayed and interpreted within museums will also be consulted. Commentaries concerning museums will be provided by Steve Hemming’s criticisms of the South Australian Museum’s Aboriginal Cultures Gallery (Hemming 2003) and Specht and MacLulich’s assessment of the challenges facing the Australian Museum in Sydney, concerning its relationship with Indigenous peoples (Specht & MacLulich 1996). Examples of how other international museums interpret Indigenous cultures will be provided by such works as David Hurst Thomas’ Skull Wars (1999) and Christina F. Kreps’ Liberating Culture: cross-cultural perspectives on museums, curation and heritage preservation (2003).

This list of sources is of course provisional, and will expand as more research is conducted.
Definitions:

Cultural resistance: Traditional activity or practice that persisted despite surveillance and efforts to assimilate Aboriginal people to suit European ideals (Lydon 2003: 175). This activity would provide a means of dealing with oppression (Attwood 1989: 46)

Limitations of the study:

This study will be limited by the lack of previous research conducted on the topic of weaving, particularly within South Australia.

The time frame in which this thesis must be completed is another major limitation. Ethics approval must be gained fairly quickly, as the thesis will be due in October 2006.

Another limitation which must be acknowledged is the extent to which knowledge regarding the significance of weaving and woven materials can be discussed with a non-Indigenous person.
Program or Schedule:
This schedule is provisional only, and may be subject to change as dictated by the research process.

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Research Progress</th>
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<tr>
<td>March 2006</td>
<td>Application for ethics approval completed by beginning of March</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research: Ngarrindjeri culture, museum studies, cultural resistance, mission sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2006</td>
<td>Preparation for discussions with Ngarrindjeri people. SA Museum, researching collection of woven materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2006</td>
<td>Amendments to ethics approval. First discussions with Ngarrindjeri people (pending permission). Draft of first chapter, draft of second chapter (literature review)</td>
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<td>June 2006</td>
<td>Draft of third chapter</td>
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<td>July 2006</td>
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<td>September 2006</td>
<td>Draft of sixth chapter, final draft</td>
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<td>October 2006</td>
<td>Submit completed honours thesis</td>
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References:


- Bell, D. 1998. *Ngarrindjeri Wurrwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be*, Spinifex, Melbourne.


• Specht, J. and MacLulich, C. 1996. Changes and challenges: The Australian Museum and Indigenous communities, in McManus, P.