

# *Futures of Community Led Collections*

*Lauren Booker*

MARANA DYARGALI



**Interviewed By:**

Associate  
Professor Jason  
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Lauren Booker is a doctoral student at the University of Technology Sydney and Research Fellow at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education & Research. Lauren's research looks at collections of hair samples that were taken from Aboriginal communities, from many different nations, during a period termed 'The Century of Race', a period informed by disciplines such as physical anthropology, eugenics and other racial comparative theories. The hair samples were procured by multiple collectors in different fields and deposited over time, in an array of institutions, both across Australia and internationally. A lot of these collections still exist in those institutions. The research addresses the problem that there isn't a clear understanding of how many collections there are and how many Ancestors hair samples exist.

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Lauren shares a conversation on research ethics relating to her doctoral studies on the topic of *Hair Samples as Ancestral Remains and the Futures of Community Lead Collection Care*. Lauren discusses the importance of Free, Prior and Informed Consent and shares insights into the projects methodological framing.

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The research participants are mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander researchers, artists, and GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) workers that work either with collecting institutions, in collecting institutions or around them. Lauren has invited the participants to talk about these collections of Ancestors' hair and discuss the issues that intersect with those collections and the collecting of Indigenous identities and bodies, specifically hair. The research extends to other conversations about how the research participants work connects with settler colonialism and collecting, around white possession of Indigenous identities, bodies, agency and knowledge. It also looks at these questions about the intersection with issues of free, prior and informed consent, ethics (and changing ethics) over time. The key question is, *what would a future of community lead collection care be like?*

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#### About Lauren

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Lauren is a descendent of the Garigal clan through her mum's family and her father's family come from Nagasaki in Japan. Lauren is a Research Fellow at Jumbunna Research at UTS, in the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub. Lauren is also completing her PhD in the School of Communications through the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS).

***JDS Tell us about how the concept of Free, Prior  
and Informed Consent relates to your research?***

**LB** The concept of free, prior and informed consent, sometimes just referred to as informed consent, is key to the PhD research project that I'm undertaking. The concept of consent is really embedded in the collections. The samples of hair that make up these collections, were taken during a period that I refer to as taken under duress. They were collected during a period of history where multiple policies, including white supremacist, protectionist and assimilation policies informed the acquisition of collecting institutions materials. One collection in particular that I am looking at is the Tindale-Birdsell collection that's at the South Australian Museum. Hair samples and collections were often taken from places such as Aboriginal missions and reserves across Australia where people were forcibly moved to and held. Australia was an oppressive settler colonial regime that First Nations people were living under. This is the context under which these samples came into being. That is why I say they were collected under a state of duress, whether or not someone gave consent, and this must be taken into account now. When you look at the social and political context of this time period, it's not such a stretch of the imagination to understand that the notion of consent really wasn't anywhere close to what we talk about now. That being said though, the idea and practice of refusal in different ways was very much alive in these contexts.

These collections are being engaged with now, and consent is being sought, now, for the destructive analysis of the Tindale-Birdsell collection. But it's a grey area now, of the standard of what that means to give consent for genetic resources, be that your own or an Ancestor's.

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of a project, but in the, I guess what you could term the afterlife of a project or into the future, it's something that isn't a one-time thing. It's hard to determine what kind of structures and processes you can teach someone to put in place in their research that will ensure that process of ongoing consent, because it's something that you have to commit to as a researcher, that you're going to structure all of your work around this idea of continual informed consent and reiterated consent. In a Western institutional framework conceptualisations of consent minimises the importance of relationships in the process.

***JDS You have mentioned the relational  
dimensions of your research, the very practical  
aspects of the methodology that you're using,  
what theories inform your approach in terms of  
relational principles and dimensions?***

**LB** I am engaging with Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory, through the work of scholars like Aileen Moreton-Robinson. So, being transparent with who I am, my story, my family's story, my work, my context. Everything kind of gets put there to make sure that people know that I'm coming into this research with my own set of ethics and my own reasons and perspectives on why the research that I'm doing is imperative and timely. It helps contextualise why I'm doing it, really it's my "why". I think being clear with that grounds you as a researcher in a space of transparency, hopefully it also builds trust because you're leading with honesty and integrity.

Standpoint also dovetails with Yarning methodologies, which I am engaging with at the moment. Yarning methodologies sit in a space of relationships, of you as the researcher speaking as well, you know, which can be a real pain to transcribe yourself but there is a lot of talking I think you have to do too, and that's how you work things out together with who you are talking with. When I'm speaking with the participants in my doctoral research, it comes from a space where, we know we're going to have a chat and it may go for a really long time—and that comes from a space of knowing each other, sometimes not super well and other times really well, and therefore in that way it's trying to keep





both participant and researcher informed on each other's standpoints. Coming into the research we work out things together as we talk. That doesn't mean we're always going to agree. It's imperative to make sure that it's clear, as the research goes on, and as the conversations go on, I'm not going to try to change or amend what they're saying or what their focus is, or what kind of chat we're engaging into. I'm not going to amend that to try to fit my research plans.

**JDS** *Are there any of the specific ethical guidelines that you feel like are really helpful for our non-Indigenous colleagues who are collaborating with us? Are there any examples you can share where have you seen that done really well?*

**LB** The new AIATSIS guidelines, a lot of work has been put into that, and it seems really solid, I definitely recommend colleagues look at all of the ethical guidelines support that has been written. I still find it really interesting that these concepts of reciprocal relationships, standpoint and transparent conversation are new to some students and researchers, or are ways of doing, being and knowing that we have to fight for. Of course though, as it's really hammered into us through our research education, these strict games we must play, you know, with research participants, to make sure the research flows, or whether that's a character the researcher plays; playing a character until the tape goes off and then we go grab a coffee, and relax the character. I think it still comes from that idea that there is this objective truth, that there is neutrality, bias can be acted away and as long as you state all of that in your ethics then it's all going to be fine. I'm interested in why research is still uncomfortable to show who the researcher is, transparently, during the research process.

I think that that ICIP, and ICIP rights and guidelines that Terry Janke and Company, and also Robynne Quiggin developed, are a really great place for people to start. For colleagues of ours that perhaps need further insight into the 'why' not so much the 'how' we can open up those pathways to help support people to do things differently. We can have conversations with people about the importance and the significance of ethical guidelines, policies and protocols around ICIP rights. I think that those guidelines can be really

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informative, rather than just sending people to the NHMRC, even though that's fine too.

**JDS** *Do you have any advice or reflections on the UTS strategy research themes that support Indigenous led, community driven, on Country research?*

**LB** When everyone wants their research to be Indigenous led, I think questions should be raised around labour. Questions on equity, transparency, support. Universities need to consider how people are going to be supported in doing Indigenous led work; the timeframes, the expectations, and the respectful reciprocity in the relationships that Indigenous led, community driven, on Country research must be based on. I think the relational aspect of my research is an extremely important element to the research. Relationships build a responsibility to my research participants, my research and myself that is a core backbone to why and how I do research. This has to feed back into the way universities operate, not just researchers. University processes need to recognise the time and transparency needed for reciprocal relationships to grow and be sustained, and let relationships and collaborative work be free of KPIs and intended outcomes.

LAUREN BOOKER



Also, I think institutions supporting transdisciplinary research in their strategy can provide more flexibility for researchers and research participants to work more holistically and collaboratively, I know this has been of great assistance to me in the way I'm able to explore my own transdisciplinary research.

***JDS Your comments speak to the question of how we can counter the extractive nature of research, in the context of this year being not only about the impacts of Covid, but also priorities around the Climate Crisis and Black Lives Matter. Do you have any other reflections on navigating research in this background?***

**LB** Yeah, I think it's important to go slow when you need to. To go slow when someone needs to, because you don't do research solo.

That's something that has been really reiterated to me, something that is really hammered into people who undergo tertiary education or enter into academia. We research in a neoliberal, settler colonial state, it's very much this notion that you're the lone person traversing the research. It's incredibly problematic because it is really extractive if that's how you're conducting your research. Whether you mean to or not, if you think that you're on your own, you're going to be taking from people, so I think it's really important to be really reflexive, and be vigilant in your practice regarding who you consider when you research. Who is this research for? Who does it benefit? That's something that I constantly ask myself and consider as I'm moving through an academic space.

A lot of the time research takes time and resources from First Nations people, and that needs to stop. Of course this is an issue that needs to be addressed at a structural level; research is taught as an extractive tool. But we also have agency to look at ourselves, look at the nature of research and find ways to refuse and resist harmful theory and practice, and build new ways of doing research.