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CONSERVATION AS SHARED RESPONSIBILITY: SOCIAL EQUITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, and the PUBLIC GOOD

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ABSTRACT

Social inequity presents a risk to cultural heritage, but conservation has a strong contribution to make to social equity and justice goals. With a focus on case studies in Australia where access to conservation, and thus to rights to heritage, is disrupted by social inequities, this paper argues that conservation, as a normative discipline premised on the idea of a future in which heritage is accessible and open to interpretation, use and enjoyment, must, like social equity and justice movements, work to create more equitable socio-political futures.

Theorizing that conservation is a public good, and focused through studies that examine Aboriginal Art Centres in remote and regional Australia, and conservation education in Australia, a case is established for the need to rebalance conservation in areas which have experienced past structural injustice. Utilizing the ethical and political philosophy of Iris Marion Young and Christine Sypnowich, critical evaluations of the profession that attempt to redefine conservation discourses are proposed to demonstrate the obligation of conservation to account for principles of social equity and justice. Overall, the paper reflects on the philosophical, ethical and societal implications for the profession of understanding conservation as a public good.

KEYWORDS

cultural materials conservation; cultural heritage; social equity; public good; conservation education

## Conservation as shared responsibility: social equity, social justice, and the public good

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### INTRODUCTION

Conservation is a profession that works within, and for, the public sector, as well as for private clients who wish to preserve significant cultural material for the future. Support for conservation, both state-provisioned and philanthropic, confirms the view that the conservation of cultural material is a public good, and that enabling access to cultural material of all kinds – from artworks and archival material, to movable heritage objects and built heritage – improves people’s lives. Both in terms of its constituency and its funding, then, conservation is securely placed within the public domain. Recognising that conservation and heritage-making are processes that unfold over time, incrementally accruing cultural frameworks of their own, this paper critically assesses the potential of conservation to enable social change, and discusses the philosophical and ethical implications of understanding conservation as a public good.<sup>i</sup>

That the preservation of cultural material is a public good is an implied assumption in conservation theory and practice, and is also made explicit in the aims and outcomes of many peak bodies. The argument that conservation supports the public good is also practically useful, as it enables access to expanded funding sources. For example, in the United States, large philanthropic organisations such as the Mellon Foundation and the Getty Foundation support conservation as a public good. In the United Kingdom, the National Lottery Heritage Fund provides support for projects that demonstrate social, education, sustainability, and/or economic benefit.<sup>ii</sup> In both Australia and the UK, the Cripps Foundation has provided significant support for built heritage and art conservation and education programs. ~~Also in Australia,~~ The Australian federally administered Community Heritage Grants program provides funding for conservation of community collections ‘which are publicly accessible, locally held and nationally significant.’<sup>iii</sup> Examples like these abound in many countries. This notion of public good therefore works to structure conservation theory and practice, and to garner broader support for conservation. Grounded in Australian case studies, but with international relevance, this paper examines the valuable links between conservation discourse and practice, and cultural heritage and social equity.

### *Theoretical background*

Definitions for the terms social equity, social justice, and public good are warranted. Making a distinction between the concepts of social equity and social equality, it is understood that while social equality refers to arguments in favour of equal opportunity or a levelling of resources provided by the state, social equity takes this a step further in order to examine, and attempt to redress, the conditions which produce disadvantage.<sup>iv</sup> The term public good also needs to be distinguished from the complementary term public goods. While ‘public goods’ can refer to publicly owned goods such as state and national heritage collections that are discussed in this paper, the public good is an abstraction that political philosopher Christine Sypnowich describes as a ‘shared environment’ or ‘culture favourable to human flourishing.’<sup>v</sup> Reciprocally, the public good ‘requires possibilities provided by culture, in the widest sense of the word.’<sup>vi</sup> The interrelation between the public good and culture is further expounded by Amartya Sen who, in 2004, argued that ‘freedom and opportunity for cultural activities are among the basic freedoms the enhancement of which can be seen to be constitutive of development.’<sup>vii</sup> These aspects of the public good, as well as its collective provision, underpin the argument about conservation and the public good advanced in this paper.

Taken together, these definitions suggest that culture is a public good that requires constituent public action to activate its social compact. This places conservation within the framework of capability theory as developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and others, which emphasizes human capabilities as a

measure of societal wellbeing.<sup>viii</sup> Capability indicators including health and education have been used in development contexts since 1990 with the United Nations Human Development Index.<sup>ix</sup> Such indicators continue to be proposed today as alternatives to the purely economic measures of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP). These take account of more holistic development measures, such as the well-being and sustainable development goals proposed in New Zealand's *Ngā Tūtohu Aotearoa – Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand*.<sup>x</sup>

Discursive links between the public good, culture and development are also embedded in the documents that enshrine the aims of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). UNESCO's Constitution of 16 November 1945 signalled the beginning of a period of post-war reconstruction that had ideological as well as practical aims. UNESCO took as its remit 'no less than the intellectual and moral reconstruction of a world in ruins.'<sup>xi</sup> In Article 1: Clause 1 of its Constitution, UNESCO declares:

The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations.<sup>xii</sup>

At its core was an acknowledgement that the Second World War 'was a war made possible by the denial of ... the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men,' enabled 'through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races.'<sup>xiii</sup> The heavily debated proposal by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) for a new definition of a museum included the statement that museums aim 'to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.'<sup>xiv</sup> This reflects the philosophy of the UNESCO Constitution, but also strengthens the imperative for museums to contribute to a broader social compact with more direct approaches that strengthen diverse capabilities. At the time of writing this paper, the decision on the proposed definition remains unresolved.

In positing a future in which heritage is accessible and open to interpretation, use and enjoyment, conservation has a philosophical basis which seeks to create public good for societies and cultures. Sypnowich's concept of 'egalitarian perfectionism' testifies to how conservation can progress human dignity, justice, equality and well-being.<sup>xv</sup> In her examination of the work of the philosopher and theorist, Michael Oakeshott, she argues that:

The idea of conserving the valuable practice and institutions of our cultural inheritance is an inherently perfectionist theme ... This involves the community identifying the valuable, and taking steps to preserve and transmit it through educational policy, by establishing strictures against unfettered development, and providing public access to cultural forms.<sup>xvi</sup>

Drawing the link between Oakeshott's position and the views of his sometime critic, G. A. Cohen, Sypnowich (citing Cohen) provides us with a straightforward reasoning for why and how conservation addresses the human need for a connection to the past:

We do not keep the cathedrals just because they are beautiful, but also because they are part of our past. We want the past to present among us. We do not want to be cut off from it. We rejoice in [our contact with] the culture of *our* past.<sup>xvii</sup>

## EQUITY IN CONSERVATION

The idea that conservation is an investment in social justice that can be realized as a capital gain is manifest in numerous initiatives and programs, and particularly in relation to the many philanthropic and public investment initiatives which claim conservation as a key platform in their funding programs. In her 2018 'President's Report,' Elizabeth Alexander, as the recently appointed President of the Andrew W Mellon Foundation, stated her intention to foreground social justice 'to ensure that Mellon continues to work to make higher education, the arts, and the humanities front and central in our broader community mission,' and asserting, 'I want there to be a justice element to all of our work, within the Foundation itself and in our grant-making and outside engagement.'<sup>xviii</sup> She extrapolated this position in a more detailed set of questions, asking:

... what do we give the status of "knowledge"? Who has access to it? By digitizing and archiving, what are we trying to save and why? What and who has been deemed precious and worth saving, and how can we critically expand that definition? What has been neglected? ... how do we think rigorously about art makers, forms, and traditions that have been under-acknowledged? In our work in art conservation and archiving, ... which cultural heritage? How do we determine what to save, and expand our understanding of what is treasured and of the ages?<sup>xix</sup>

In a submission to the Australian Treasury, the Myer Foundation and Sydney Myer Fund noted that while Australia does not have 'the rich culture of giving as experienced in the USA and Europe':

...increased giving in Australia ... reflects the greater engagement of the Australian community in the life, problems and issues of the community. This surely makes for a better community: one where people are concerned and involved, and where more individuals pursue justice and equity.<sup>xx</sup>

This recognition of the dynamic relationship of culture to social justice and equity also plays a central role in UK heritage funding, as illustrated in the 2019-2014 *Strategic Funding Framework* of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and other reports.<sup>xxi</sup>

Public foundation programs increase the capacity of conservation to inform the public good through strengthening cultural capital, increasing social capacity and redressing structural injustice. In doing so, they disrupt what Iris Marion Young identifies as 'structural injustice' where socio-economic structures support capacity and opportunity within a dominant group, while dominating and depriving capacity and opportunity in another.<sup>xxii</sup> Structural injustice is perpetuated through an accrual in cultural capital supported by social-structural processes that constrain capacities by 'blocking possibilities' for disempowered groups to develop cultural capital of their own.<sup>xxiii</sup> In conservation, this can be understood as a process of cultural accrual over time, as what has been previously conserved continues to be conserved due to its sustained existence in a well-conserved condition. The capacity, or opportunity for flourishing, afforded by conservation is the possibility to make informed decisions about if and how cultural heritage is conserved, and how collective memory is constituted.

From this primary capacity, other capacities result, such as using the cultural record as evidence or for education; benefiting economically from the ownership of well-conserved cultural objects and works; and preventing misrepresentation in the form of fakes and forgeries. But as the conservation field is shaped by past policies, investments, cultural preferences and racial, cultural and class-based hegemonies, its capacity to afford such capacities is impeded. What Marion Young describes as the 'materialized effects of past actions and decisions' constrain the present, and social inequities expose collections to unequal

levels of risk.<sup>xxiv</sup> In considering changes in conservation practice and theory that can actively support the dismantling of structural injustice, the concept of redress must therefore be of particular interest.

#### *Social Justice through a Cultural Rights Approach*

Social equity and justice in conservation can also be approached through the lens of cultural rights. The right to science and culture is one of the economic, social and cultural rights claimed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and related documents of international human rights law. It recognizes that everyone has a right to participate in culture, to benefit from science and technology, and to protection of authorship. Article 15 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* sets out:

(2) The steps to be taken by the States Parties to the present Covenant to achieve the full realization of this right shall include those necessary for the conservation, the development and the diffusion of science and culture.<sup>xxv</sup>

The importance of cultural rights has also been articulated in relation to Indigenous Peoples,<sup>xxvi</sup> and the right of access to information.<sup>xxvii</sup> As Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski point out, however, instruments of soft law do not offer sufficient protection for cultural heritage, nor for the ‘goals related to human emancipation given their potential for transformational impact’ implicit in heritage-making and conservation.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In the absence of legal protection, policy-based approaches can be used to frame access to cultural heritage as not only a right, but also an ‘essential service’ for communities.<sup>xxix</sup> Linking culture to wellbeing, Scott Rankin asserts that ‘culture is a human right, the right of all to be seen and heard in our nation’s narrative, the right to be safe,’ and that there is a collective responsibility, currently left to the state (or philanthropic support) ‘for preserving traditional practice, cultural continuity and community good.’<sup>xxx</sup> The benefits of treating conservation as a collective responsibility, and reprioritising needs in a more efficient and equitable way, are evident in large-scale preservation audits and related policies: for example, in the Netherlands’ Delta Plan,<sup>xxxi</sup> and in the UK through audits into the state of sound collections,<sup>xxxii</sup> cultural value,<sup>xxxiii</sup> and heritage site collections.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In the Australian context, a previous paper by the authors has proposed a needs-based approach to conservation funding to respond to spatial inequity that exists between rural, regional and remote communities, and those populations in the major cities, in accessing conservation services.<sup>xxxv</sup>

#### *Precedents for Social Equity in Conservation: Australia*

In Australia, from the late 1970s onwards the groundwork for future policies was founded in an understanding of conservation as a public good and shared responsibility. This understanding lies in the historical development of the conservation profession from this time. The following examples, focused on the preservation of Indigenous Australian cultural material, demonstrate a history of commitment to engagement by conservators with the concept of cultural rights, and the links between conservation, heritage and social equity and justice.

Legislative progress was made in the 1980s with the 1984 *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act* and its 1987 amendment, which recognized ‘elders and communities in their role of protecting the continuity of culture and heritage.’<sup>xxxvi</sup> Reassessing the role of museums and other collections in the light of several major inquiries and public statements on Indigenous issues during the 1980s and 1990s, Des Griffin noted the increased awareness and expectations within and outside government of the role museums might play ‘in strengthening pride and self-esteem in indigenous communities.’<sup>xxxvii</sup> Policies specific to preservation and conservation followed on these developments in

the 1990s, reflecting an understanding of conservation in relation to the public good, culture and society. In 1993, the first overarching museums policy statement to inform museum practices for the care and management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage was released as *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*.<sup>xxxviii</sup> In addition to the guiding principle of recognizing 'the inherent interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the care and control, spiritual and practical, of their cultural property,' Principle 8 stated that 'Conservation practice must adapt to cultural requirements.'<sup>xxxix</sup> In 1995, *The National Conservation and Preservation Policy for Movable Cultural Heritage* acknowledged that 'museums have particular obligations to conserve and preserve the movable culture heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities and peoples.'<sup>xl</sup> In 1998, cultural diversity was recognized as one of the 'fundamental issues related to the conservation and preservation of Australia's heritage collections.'<sup>xli</sup>

More recently, the focus has been on the role that the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) can take in advocating for reconciliation in Australia. A statement made on the occasion of the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) conference to Melbourne in 2000 explicates the conservation profession's responsibilities in this area:

As conservators we especially recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ownership of and right to self-determination concerning the preservation and representation of their material culture. We agree that the objects and the information relevant to them are of equal importance, and that conservation practice must adapt to cultural requirements.<sup>xlii</sup>

#### IDENTIFYING THE NEED FOR CONSERVATION

For conservation to be understood as a public good enabling human flourishing, it must be responding to an *a priori* need. The need for conservation is commonly identified through the categorization of condition, value and/or significance. In such methods, need is quantified to serve the purpose of allocating resources in response to competing claims of conservation need. This is evident in the structured assessment processes of many countries, such as Preservation Needs Assessments in Australia, which link the goal of identifying need to the allocation of limited financial and material resources through the Community Heritage Grants Scheme.<sup>xliii</sup> What such programs lack, however, is an exigency to redress past structural injustices; that is, distributing resources according to social needs as well as the needs of the object or collection. To develop this expanded definition of need, the case studies below provide examples of the need for conservation within the contexts of Aboriginal Art Centres, and conservation education in Australia.

#### *Auditing inequity: the case of Aboriginal Art Centre-based community collections*

The intersection of social equity and conservation is significant in considerations relating to the amount of cultural and historic material held in community owned and managed Aboriginal Art Centres across Australia. A long-term lack of investment in funding and infrastructure for remote Indigenous communities has resulted in major inequity when compared to the resources available for collections of similar significance located in major cities. In 2017, the Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) – the peak body for Aboriginal Art Centres across the northern regions of Western Australia and the Northern Territory – published a report, *Safe Keeping: A report on the care and management of Art Centre-based community collections*.<sup>xliv</sup> Examining the conservation crisis facing the diverse art, archive, digital heritage and museum collections in its constituent art centre membership, *Safe Keeping* is 'the first report of its kind to present research into remote community collections across the Top End of Australia.'<sup>xlv</sup>

The high response rate and carefully considered views of the 29 respondents demonstrate that community-held collections are highly valued 'cross-cultural and intergenerational meeting places and 'safe houses' for important cultural material' that allow communities to maintain and revitalize 'traditional art, culture and Indigenous knowledge in a contemporary context.'<sup>xlvi</sup> The key needs of the collections identified by the survey respondents are unsurprising and reflect the challenges of many, if not most, under-resourced collections. They include 'poor storage conditions, incomplete documentation and insufficient back-up of existing collection records, as well as a 'lack of an overall collection documentation, conservation, and risk management strategy.'<sup>xlvii</sup> One very specific need identified is for 'education pathways with recognition of prior learning of Indigenous arts workers including traditional knowledge, collection care experience and unaccredited training.'<sup>xlviii</sup>

Despite limited resources, over 80% of the collections are catalogued, and there is a strong willingness and motivation to continue to improve on the current levels of collection management and preservation, along with 'informed and carefully considered ideas for how this can be achieved.'<sup>xlix</sup> This, of course, is tempered by the practical reality that to progress these goals 'will require investment in infrastructure, staffing, capacity building and education programs.'<sup>1</sup>

In his foreword to the report, ANKA Chairman, Djambawa Marawili, provides a succinct explanation of the interconnected impact of the social and intergenerational inequities embedded in the current under-resourced conservation model, explaining that:

We really need to focus on looking after that art, whether it is in community collections, galleries or universities; whether they are looked after by Napagi or Yolngu. Safe keeping makes Aboriginal people feel really strong and proud and alive. Caring for collections is a really significant role.<sup>ii</sup>

Preservation, as is well-known, takes many forms, including the intangible transmission of oral-based cultures, but the continuity of this heritage is at risk in communities which have a much lower life expectancy rate than the Australian average. As the ANKA report states, there is a particularly 'urgent need to capture knowledge about collections held by Elders and senior knowledge holders before it is too late.'<sup>iii</sup>

Djambawa Marawili is clear about the necessity of engaging younger members of communities in the preservation and continuation of cultural knowledge, explaining that 'stories are kept alive through action, people singing and dancing. This puts them out for the younger generations to see on their own country; getting them interested in culture so they can learn who they are.' Speaking directly to the urgent and essential need for continuing intergenerational knowledge transfer process through culture, he further explains that:

The collections are also a good way of learning for the lost ones who don't know who they are. If it is lost, if there is no collection, people will lose the identity in their soul and their blood. Only a few living people are left now who have deep knowledge and responsibility for ceremony and Law.<sup>iiii</sup>

Distilling the needs identified throughout the report into an effective means to address them, Djambawa Marawili pinpoints the pathway to change required:

Caring for collections is a really significant role. It is important to give real jobs to Aboriginal people caring for and looking after objects in their community museums. That

way they can also learn to share the knowledge and the patterns and the stories for future generations.<sup>liv</sup>

#### *Auditing inequity: Conservation education*

In her Report, Elizabeth Alexander also posed the question: ‘... if a college education is life-transforming and expanding, how do we think about the question of who has access to it?’<sup>lv</sup>

For conservation this is not simply a question of demographics but is at the heart of the epistemology of conservation. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital helps to demonstrate how conservation ensures access to cultural material that can be utilized by a range of individuals for a range of purposes.<sup>lvi</sup> The value of cultural material traverses a range of domains of cultural, social and symbolic forms of capital as well as being a contributor in the domain of economic capital. One of the most significant values held in cultural material is education. Although systems such as education are intended to ‘transmit a cultural heritage which is considered as being the undivided property of the whole society,’ inequities in gaining cultural capital ‘mean that it continues to accumulate to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves.’<sup>lvii</sup> Conservation may enable a net gain in cultural capital through the maintenance of the existing cultural record (such as archives, built heritage and museum collections) and the secured development of new iterations of the cultural record (such as contemporary art and new forms of cultural records), but as a profession it demands a high level of cultural capital. This starts when students seeking entry to tertiary programs are required to demonstrate capacity to engage at a postgraduate level, and often only after the completion of a range of prerequisites that may include additional curriculum and extensive volunteer experience. Such requirements, by default, lead to self-selection within the profession. In this way and often despite good intentions, the status quo is secured and then reinforced by formal and informal networks of knowledge and skills transmission by professional conservators. For this reason, the question of who has access to a college education is also a question about what knowledges are not contained or included within this cycle of education capital investment.

In 1990, Marlene Schommer explored the question, ‘What effects do students’ beliefs about the nature of knowledge have on comprehension?’<sup>lviii</sup> After examining (a) social/personal, (b) cognitive, (c) educational atmosphere and opportunity, (d) encouragement toward independence variables, and (e) adherence to rules or to guidelines, Schommer concluded that ‘an important finding is that epistemological beliefs seem to affect students’ processing of information and monitoring of their comprehension.’<sup>lix</sup>

A lack of diversity in conservation education, evident in both faculty and student demographics, results in a lack of diversity within the profession and in research. Recent studies indicate that this lack of diversity generally manifests as gender-specific with impacts both on the ways in which knowledge is shared,<sup>lx</sup> and the levels of remuneration and by extension seniority within the profession.<sup>lxi</sup>

These questions of epistemology, beliefs and decision-making add another layer of complexity to the question of diversity, equity and social justice, and point to a need to find mechanisms for not only changing the demographics of student conservators, but also changing the epistemological framework in which conservation programs recognize and build knowledge.

#### A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONSERVATION

Actions which respond to these identified needs are predicated upon the principles explicated in this paper of shared responsibility for conservation, and a commitment to directing conservation towards its role as a public good. The need for actions and policies to respond to inequities in rural and regional access to services, and to redress the effects of colonization in communities that own and manage

Aboriginal Art Centres, gave rise to a reconfiguration of entry pathways into tertiary conservation education at the University of Melbourne. This model is now being considered for other programs and demonstrates a way in which conservation can contribute to change in pedagogical, epistemological and preservation realms.

In Australia, Indigenous art centres support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the production and sale of art; in the development of community archives, museums and keeping places; and in the preservation of cultural material and cultural records. Many art centres also have audiovisual programs that generate large audiovisual and digital records. Cognizant of the need to train conservation specialists to support the needs of these collections, in 2019 the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne welcomed its first cohort in a new education program. The Specialist Certificate in Cross-Cultural Conservation and Heritage sought to address two key needs: a lack of diversity in conservation education, and a lack of cultural epistemological frameworks within the university that reflect the diversity of cultural material. Both these needs lie at the centre of broader questions of social equity. A significant driver in the development of the Specialist Certificate program was the experience of Grimwade Centre staff of over two decades of conducting training programs in collaboration with communities impacted by disadvantage, such as those managing post-trauma reconstruction or with lower education opportunities, or where members had not completed the education prerequisites required for entry to tertiary conservation programs. During this time, staff observed how in many communities, senior knowledge holders have been instrumental in conserving cultural material for decades, often working in local museums or art centres, and under difficult circumstances that include a lack of infrastructure, lack of funds, English as a second or third language, and lack of conservation resources. Most students entering conservation programs have less experience and cultural authority than these senior practitioners who have been unable to take part in similar educational opportunities. There are a number of reasons why this group has been unable to enter formal tertiary education, ranging from limited formal education and prerequisite qualifications; geographic remoteness; lack of economic capacity; and disruption due to colonization, civil disturbance and war. The net result has been, however, that such senior practitioners, unable to enter conservation programs that require completion of secondary schooling or require a tertiary qualification, are instead offered conservation training through government- or philanthropically-sponsored short training programs that do not lead to a post-graduate qualification. This, in turn, embeds disadvantage as recent graduates continue to develop their careers, while the senior knowledge holders who preserve and transfer their knowledge remain 'unqualified,' despite their lifelong commitment to cultural conservation and the work they do to educate the next generation of knowledge holders. When this model of 'disabling education' is continued, the disassociation of community-held knowledge from institutional programs is reinforced and inequity is continued.

To combat this embedded status quo, the Grimwade Centre proposed a new postgraduate program, the Specialist Certificate in Cross-Cultural Conservation and Heritage, designed as a knowledge exchange program. The program combines traditional and contemporary approaches to the preservation of cultural objects across a range of cultural settings, focusing on the conservation of cultural material as a foundation for broader understandings of the significance of culture as a source of identity, social cohesion and sustainable development. Working in partnership with ANKA, the Specialist Certificate has been developed as a two-way learning exchange in order to provide students from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds with the opportunity to benefit from the expertise held by fellow students and their communities, and from Indigenous experts in Australia and other cultural leaders in the Asia-Pacific region. The intended learning outcomes are that students will:

- Be able to apply cross-cultural skills and methods to the identification and resolution of problems within complex changing social contexts in the cultural materials conservation and affiliated professions.
- Have developed a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary understanding and approach to the identification and resolution of conservation and heritage issues in diverse contexts.
- Have developed an independent approach to different knowledge systems that uses rigorous methods of enquiry and appropriate theories and methodologies that are applied with respect for ethical values across community and professional understandings of cultural materials conservation.
- Have a firm grasp of what constitutes effective cross-cultural communication as part of a shared teaching and learning experience.<sup>lxii</sup>

With support from ANKA staff and community leaders, nine students were selected for the first cohort based on their extensive cultural knowledge, and their commitment to the preservation of their community's cultural material. All held important cultural knowledge and extensive experience working with their local art centres in remote communities.<sup>lxiii</sup> None held a previous tertiary qualification and most had limited secondary education. All graduated successfully, providing them with the opportunity to gain entry to the Masters by Coursework in Cultural Materials Conservation. In December 2019, four inaugural graduates of the program presented at the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials National Conference in Melbourne, introducing their work to their peers and extending networks, knowledge and experience for both presenters and audience.<sup>lxiv</sup>

#### INEQUITY AS A RISK FACTOR FOR PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE

In advancing conservation as a shared responsibility, constraints on the ways in which conservation can contribute to the public good and enable human flourishing must also be addressed. At the same time, articulating how the preservation of heritage is threatened by inequitable access to conservation may also bolster arguments for increased consideration of conservation in public policy and philanthropic support.

As inequitable access limits the potential value of conservation, social inequity can therefore be considered a risk factor for cultural heritage. Not only do the forms of inequity described above disrupt the preservation of heritage objects and collections, they also limit conservation's capacity to positively affect the communities surrounding these collections. Risk factors to cultural heritage play an important role in establishing where there is a need for conservation, and in principle, also determine how resources for preservation are distributed. Risk, as it is understood in conservation as well as in other practices, is 'a socially constructed interpretation and response to a "real" danger that objectively exists, even if knowledge about it can only ever be mediated through sociocultural processes.'<sup>lxv</sup>

In the context of cultural conservation, risks are known as agents of deterioration. Assessments of collections' likelihood of exposure and vulnerability to these risks informs preservation and disaster management planning, and the development of methods of risk mitigation. The nine 'agents of deterioration' described by Stefan Michalski in 1990 – physical forces; theft or vandalism; fire; water; pests; contaminants; light, UV; incorrect temperature; and incorrect relative humidity – are primarily interpreted, in the appraisals and mitigation strategies of conservators, as objective risks.<sup>lxvi</sup> The original nine agents are now supplemented by a tenth, 'custodial neglect' or 'dissociation'.<sup>lxvii</sup> The terms 'custodial neglect' and 'dissociation' imply a passive negligence or a demise resulting from disinterest. When overlaid by social inequity, however, it is clearer that dissociation has been also a tool of oppression at worst, and an abuse of power at best, leading to a loss of cultural material and associated knowledge for specific communities and not for others. In turn, custodial neglect can also be reframed as denial of

custodial access, similarly disabling the educational, economic and social benefits that accrue from access to cultural material. Miriam Clavir's pioneering work in cultural dissociation acknowledged the disjunct between the views held by First Nations communities on preservation, and practices within institutions.<sup>lxviii</sup> In the twenty-first century, this continues to challenge many collecting institutions. For this reason, active change is required within conservation to address inequity and the lack of diversity. In order to effect real change, actions will, by necessity, require political positions to be taken, positions that seek to actively dislodge the status quo.

All conservation decision-making is political, leading to the choice of one course of action over another, and because of the nature of cultural material, each action has social and cultural, as well as often economic and educative, repercussions. Questions raised by this political reality are: Which works are granted collective protection? What are the mechanisms of this protection? How is conservation discourse mobilized in arguments for or against repatriation? What are the effects of conservation practices on the surrounding environment, for example, in the need for large storage spaces? How can the public cost of conserving single, highly valued works be compared to collections of less (economically) valued materials? Who determines what is significant and valuable and how do they get to be the authoritative voice?

## CONCLUSION

While conservation is constrained by social inequity, it is nevertheless instrumental in advancing the public good and wellbeing. As argued above, there exists a social need for conservation. The inverse is also true: conservation needs to redress structural injustices in order to produce social benefits that in turn increase the efficacy of conservation theory and practice. If, as this paper has argued, conservation is a public good that enables human flourishing, then the distribution of resources for conservation must be more aligned to social and cultural needs.

The need for increased equity in conservation has been explored from two angles: the need to support Indigenous Australian cultural heritage at Art Centres; and the need to increase access to conservation education. From these identified needs, an example intervention into tertiary conservation education has shown how change in conservation pedagogy and epistemology is linked to social change. The implications of this theory of conservation for the public good and cultural rights are also explored. Conservation, as a social good corresponding to a social need, provides public benefit. The outcome of conservation, then, is not the reifying preservation of fixed heritage entities, but to permit and enhance the 'flourishing' offered by conservation. From this position, conservation is clearly well-positioned to address problems of social equity and social justice.

The case studies also furnish a new interpretative framework for understanding the public good of conservation. Bringing conservation into conversation with the ethical and political philosophers Iris Marion Young and Christine Sypnowich, the centrality of conservation to the public good has been illustrated in practice. It is hoped that the discourse around conservation can continue to be shifted so that conservation is apprehended not as a tool for maintaining the status quo, but as a mechanism for social equity and social justice. Examined as a dialectical process, conservation and the social world reveal the transformative potential of each other.

## BIOS

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