

**Sarah YU paper for**

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**Author:** Sarah YU

**Paper title:**

*Changing the gaze: recognising and reconciling the pearling heritage of northern Australia*

**Summary:**

*I believe in the mobility of collections, that our 'objects' are not done. They come with stories and people. By receiving them into the museum, and now returning them, we opened the door to your community, your stories ... The walls of our museum are becoming more fluid...*

*Leontine Meijer-van Mensch, Director, SES and Grassi Museum*

Leontine made this statement during the recent ceremony to mark the return of ancestors, whose remains had been sold by Australian pearlers to her museum, to the Yawuru and Karajarri communities of northwest Australia. Along with human remains the museum has also collected ethnographic objects, including riji (engraved pearlshell) which it is also offering to repatriate. In the northwest, the object that best symbolises movement, mobility, and adaptability, is goowarn (pearlshell)— which Aboriginal people have passed through exchange systems for over 20,000 years, and used as an object to carry story and memory in their ceremony and art. It also became an object of exploitation and interaction as the colonial pearling industry developed in the late 19th century.

In this paper, Yu explores how the relationships created around the cultural and economic uses of goowarn (pearlshell) have evolved. It is a complex, culturally rich story that has been undervalued as significant heritage of the northwest. Yu's approach presents the pearling story as a dynamic (mobile) web of intersections and interactions; a holistic and respectful approach that reconciles the traumas of the colonial past. As Leontine suggests, she argues that the identification and management of heritage needs to 'open its doors' and engage a similar fluidity by respecting the stories and associated cultural responsibilities of indigenous people.

**Author Biography:**

**Sarah Yu** is an anthropologist, curator and heritage consultant who focuses on relationships between people and their connections to country. Currently based in Broome, she works for Nyamba Buru Yawuru— the business arm of the Yawuru native title group. Collaborating with Indigenous artists and writers she has curated many award-winning projects: *Lustre: Pearlring & Australia* exhibition (2015- 2021) with the Western Australian Museum; *Jetty to Jetty Heritage Trail*, (2016); *Opening the Common Gate* exhibition, to honour the 1967 Referendum (2007). She has recently completed her doctoral thesis in anthropology at Heidelberg University entitled: *Window to the Soul: Pearlshell, Pearlring and Saltwater Country Reconciling cultural perspectives of pearlring and its heritage in northwest Australia* and has curated the *Wanggajarli Burugun (we are coming home)* exhibition about Yawuru's story of repatriation of their stolen ancestors. She is a research affiliate with the Australian National University, the University of Notre Dame (Broome), and the West Australian Museum.