PhD Studentship Aesthetics of the Exhibited Body (Melbourne, 1 Oct 26–25 May 27)

Melbourne, Oct 1, 2026–May 25, 2027

Miguel Gaete, Nottingham

International Joint PhD Studentship: “Aesthetics of the Exhibited Body: Transnational Circuits of Race, Beauty, and Ugliness in European Human Zoos (1851–1913)”.

The School of Culture and Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, in collaboration with KU Leuven, invites applications for a fully funded International Joint PhD studentship, commencing 1 October 2026. The successful candidate will conduct doctoral research on the visual culture and aesthetics of so-called “human zoos” at European World Fairs between 1851 and 1913, examining how exhibitions of Indigenous peoples constructed and circulated racialised representations across transnational colonial networks.
The project is based primarily at the University of Melbourne, Parkville, with a compulsory minimum stay of twelve months at KU Leuven. Applications are reviewed on a rolling basis and will close as soon as a suitable candidate is identified; early submission is strongly encouraged.

Project Details

This PhD project investigates how so-called human zoos at European World Fairs constructed and circulated visual representations of Indigenous bodies, focusing on people from Congo, the Americas, and Australia within European transnational networks. It examines how Indigenous men, women, and children were staged, photographed, and consumed as visual spectacles within a pervasive colonial exhibitionary culture. Between 1851 and 1913, human exhibitions across Belgium, France, Germany, and the UK displayed an estimated 25,000 individuals, functioning as physical expressions of racial ideologies. These displays reflected malleable notions of beauty, ugliness, normality, and monstrosity, creating artificial and instrumental distinctions between Europeans and colonised peoples.

Through meticulous examination of photographs, illustrated magazines, advertisements, postcards and other visual media, the project traces how racialised bodies were both aestheticised and politicised. Adopting a comparative approach, it concentrates on three critical nodes of exhibition: the 1897 Brussels International Exposition in Tervuren, where the display of Congolese people legitimised Belgian colonial rule, the exhibition of the so-called giant Patagonians at the Jardin Zoologique d’Acclimatation in Paris, and the circulation and display of Aboriginal Australians across the United Kingdom.

By placing these case studies in dialogue, the research aims to demonstrate how human exhibitions operated as instruments of colonial persuasion that shaped public attitudes toward race

and empire. Ultimately, it contributes to visual culture, art history, and museum studies by revealing how these representational regimes and the “spectacle” of the Indigenous body continue to influence heritage institutions and public memory today.

Available Scholarships

The successful applicant will receive a scholarship package which includes a tuition fee waiver, living allowance, health insurance, and relocation support.

Applications should include:
- Academic transcript(s)
- Resume
- Research proposal
- Writing sample
- English requirements: https://study.unimelb.edu.au/how-to-apply/english-language-requirements/graduate-english-language-requirements

Expressions of interest should be submitted via the following link: https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/opportunity/1739-aesthetics-of-the-exhibited-body--transnational-circuits-of-race--beauty--and-ugliness-in-european-human-zoos-(1851%E2%80%931913)

Questions about the application can be directed to:
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Reference:

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