Article

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Reclaiming archives: guest editorial

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Abstract: Highlighting perspectives from First Nations peoples whose cultural heritage is held in archives of various types, this article sets the scene for this special edition on “Reclaiming Archives.” Emerging protocols for Indigenous community engagement with archiving institutions have been driven by community demands for access, digitisation and return of archival cultural heritage records, and supported by various peak professional organisations such as the International Council on Archives, the International Council of Museums and the Indigenous Archives Collective. A complex history of exploitation, resistance and trauma surrounds First Nations cultural records created during Australia’s “Assimilation Era” (roughly 1935-1975), and several contributions to the volume explore the implications of this colonial past for management and reclamation of such archival records today. Indeed, the authors contend that institutions today have much to learn from engagement with community members seeking to reappropriate their cultural records. The essay finishes by relating the issues outlined above to the articles presented in this issue, which provide perspectives from Australia and internationally regarding Indigenous cultural collections, with special reference to research-based collections of Indigenous music and dance.

Keywords: community engagement, indigenous collections, repatriation

1 Reclaiming Archives

What does the phrase “reclaiming archives” mean? In editing this special edition, we propose that approaching First Nations archival practices involves flipping the gaze from the archival institution holding First Nations records to the perspective of the First Nations people whose cultural heritage is reflected in the archival holdings. The editors, all actively engaged in contemporary projects of archival reclamation, bring disciplinary perspectives from archival studies, community development, cultural studies and the arts to develop intersecting perspectives on how First Nations Archives can function as active sites for intervening in public affairs through contemporary practices of culture-making. Collaborating with present-day First Nations research and communities, and building on emerging protocols for Indigenous-led community engagement with archiving institutions, the articles explore diverse models for recuperating and evaluating dispersed records and testimonies of cultural heritage. What does “preservation” mean in the context of dynamic cultural practices? How best to understand and respond to the historical trauma embedded in the provenance stories of many colonial collections, and thus find culturally respectful ways of “repatriating” archival materials? How do the various digital platforms used to discover and access archival objects including multimedia recordings facilitate and/or impede efforts by contemporary First Nations people to reappropriate and in some cases re-perform their cultural history? To what extent do First Nations performers curate records of their contemporary cultural practices to facilitate archiving and preservation?

2 Emerging Protocols for “Repatriation” and Indigenous Community Engagement with Archiving Institutions

Access, digitisation and return of historical archives, along with the development of local community digitised collections, have been developed over recent years by First Nations peoples globally (Ormond-Parker and Sloggett...
2012). Several examples of community returns of archives are explored in the papers presented in this special issue. In response to the growing demand for access to historical and contemporary records, many institutions are now responding more positively to such requests, urged by peak professional organisations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the National Archives of Australia.

A key development was the Universal Declaration on Archives (UDA), developed by the International Council on Archives in 2010 and endorsed by UNESCO in 2011. The Declaration aimed to “improve understanding and awareness of archives among the general public and key decision-makers. It is a powerful, succinct statement of the relevance of archives in modern society” (International Council on Archives 2010, n.p.). Building on this groundwork, the need to address the specific situations of Indigenous peoples within Archives was recognised when in 2019 the International Council on Archives and the National Archives of Australia held an Indigenous Summit led by First Nations Archivists. The summit, See us, Hear us, Walk with us: Challenging and Decolonising the Archive, was held at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Center in Adelaide, Australia, and resulted in the development of the Tandanya Declaration (International Council on Archives Expert Group on Indigenous Matters 2019), the first specific international archives declaration on Indigenous people, which aligned with the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) (United Nations 2007).

The Tandanya Declaration calls for:

- “[A] respectful ethical relationship between archival institutions and Indigenous communities to recognize the diversity of social meanings embodied in archival materials and the knowledge models that interpret them” (Article 1);
- Recognition of “Indigenous ownership of Indigenous traditional knowledge, cultural expression, knowledge and intellectual property” (Article 2);
- Recognition that the “common representation of Indigenous peoples in colonial archival institutions is a product of forced assimilation and cognitive erasure of Indigenous culture and identity” over the 500-year history of the colonial encounter (Article 3);
- Recognition that “research and access to archival records is a socially mediated process and a conceptual site of conflict between European and Indigenous ways of knowing. . . .” (Article 4); and
- Recognition that, as stated in UNDRIP, “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (Article 5).

Article 4a of the Tandanya Declaration specifically addresses the issue of control and access to archive materials, stating:

This Declaration recognizes colonial states have created, in academia and government, a tremendous volume of records concerning Indigenous peoples. These records have been disseminated and stored without the input of the affiliated Indigenous community. There is a need for affiliated Indigenous peoples to gain a degree of control over the access to information created by state-directed governance and cultural authorities (International Council on Archives Expert Group on Indigenous Matters 2019).

Along with access and control by Indigenous peoples to their archives, including for projects such as Indigenous language revitalization projects (Thorpe and Galassi 2014), a loud chorus of voices are being added to the call for the physical return of cultural materials. In a major leap forward for the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in respecting the particular rights of Indigenous peoples to their heritage, in December 2021 ICOM published a set of protocols entitled Guidance for Restitution and Return of Items from University Museums and Collections. Recognising the call of communities “to have other historical and modern-day rights and resources restored to them,” the Guidance is aimed specifically at the return and restitution of items from university museum collections. In particular, item 4 of the Guidance states that university museums “should welcome restitution requests made by, and on behalf of individuals, groups and public bodies,” recognising “the rights of Indigenous people to be self-determining with their cultural heritage.” Several articles within this Special Issue specifically address this topic.

The Indigenous Archives Collective’s “Position Statement on the Right of Reply to Indigenous Knowledges and Information Held in Archives” also includes a number of principles relevant to this material and this project, including:

- “The right to know:
  - Without an authoritative source to identify where relevant material is to be found, further rights, such as the right of reply, cannot be activated;
- Cultural safety
  - All initiatives to activate Indigenous people’s rights in data, information and records about them should be undertaken to ensure the cultural safety of participants and knowledge;
– Consent:
  – Every opportunity for engagement with Indigenous peoples should be taken to support Indigenous peoples’ control of their information, knowledges and representations;
– Institutions as facilitators, not owners:
  – Prioritise institutional support of Indigenous rights to manage Indigenous material according to culturally appropriate means;
– Advocacy:
  – Continual advocacy is required to prioritise the rights of Indigenous peoples in the management of cultural material.” (Indigenous Archives Collective 2021, 247–249)

3 Australia’s “Assimilation Era” and Beyond

Several articles included in this Special Issue navigate the role of public performances by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the “Assimilation era” (roughly 1937–1975), a time when official Australian government policies mandated the assimilation of First Nations people into Australian society, enacted through suppression of cultural identity via policies such as child removal, restrictions on movement and cultural activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including use of Indigenous languages), and degradation of economic self-sufficiency through systematic alienation of lands and exploitation of labor (Haebich 2007). Paradoxically, alongside this history of settler colonial efforts to destroy identity-forming cultural activities of First Nations people runs a parallel history of fascination with the same cultural features that were otherwise suppressed. Throughout this period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people responded innovatively and insistently to assimilationist policy in order to maintain, enliven and develop their culture and its diversity, including deployment of public performances of their cultural heritage to assert cultural survival and create arenas for engagement and communication with the general public (Harris 2020). The growing field of Settler Colonial Studies has sought to expose how the appropriation of First Nations cultures served to attribute creative, political, nation-defining agency to non-Indigenous Australians at the expense of First Nations people (Harris 2020; Wolfe 2006). With the 1968 census recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as citizens of Australia, an ongoing cultural resurgence culminated in laws recognising Land Rights and political movements stressing the right to self-determination.

Objects that entered archives during the Assimilation period bring with them complex histories of exploitation and resistance. Contemporary efforts to “reawaken” these archival records by reconnecting them with their rightful owners must be mindful not only of their potential for renewal of cultural practices, but also of their burden of historical trauma (Barwick et al. 2020; Thorpe and Willis 2019). The ongoing appropriation and curation of archival records by First Nations researchers throughout the Assimilation and subsequent eras of self-determination has resulted in an outpouring of academic, artistic and creative activity (e.g., Harkin 2019) as well as in powerful political interventions to secure title to land (Koch 2013) and remedying of copyright law and legal practices (Janke 2021; Janke and Iacovino 2012; Janke and Quiggin 2006).

4 What Can Community Engagement Teach About Collection and Archival Practices?

Recording technologies and collection and deposit of recordings in archives have long been methods used to preserve Indigenous musical traditions in Australia and elsewhere. Archival collections may include recordings and associated documentation, written notes describing musical practice and its cultural context, transcriptions of speech and music, photographs, audio recordings of practitioners’ discussion of music, and video recordings of dance and ceremonial activity. In settler states such as Australia, where the expression and practice of Indigenous song (along with dance, language and related ceremonial and cultural practices) have been targeted by colonial regimes for interruption (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, 175; Trollyn 2022), these collections have the potential to be rich sources of history, culture and identity for current and future Indigenous communities. In recent decades, as archival collections have been digitised and indexed, thus making them more discoverable, there has been an exponential rise in Indigenous community use of archival records of Indigenous knowledges pertaining to language, music and other cultural and creative practices (Christen 2015; Thorner 2010).

Uses of such records are manifold: to supplement community-led language documentation and teaching/learning initiatives; to inform family and community histories and research; and to inform, support and, in some cases, to revive song and dance practice, language practice, and other intangible knowledges associated with material cultural practice (see examples in Gunderson, Lancefield,
and Woods 2019). Indigenous communities-of-practice treat archival collections not just as sources to support musical practice, but also as a part of practice itself, namely as mediums for learning and remembering musical practices, for intergenerational and peer-to-peer transmission (e.g., Treloyn, Martin, and Charles 2019), and for distribution of musical and expression within and across communities. Archival records may feature in many contemporary sites of artistic practice, contributing to the ways in which practitioners articulate innovation as a function of continuity, perform the ancestral antecedence of contemporary practices and use musical practice to change and shape society (see, for example, Barwick 2017).

Nevertheless, cultural custodians, allied researchers and collection managers often report barriers when attempting to discover and access knowledges recorded in archives, collections and content management systems. These may be technical barriers, such as recordings that are yet to be digitised; digital audio formats that are difficult to search and navigate; digital audio that is not linked to archived metadata; missing and/or incomplete metadata; and archival search platforms that are not designed for granular searches (see, for example, Treloyn and Dowding 2017). Barriers may also relate to differences in the epistemological frameworks within which knowledge is valued within and across cultures and across time.

Significantly, however, many barriers to access are overcome through individual and collaborative efforts of discovery and repatriation of collections. Through these processes, the archival collections may be enriched as links between materials are discovered and items are identified (Treloyn, Charles and O’Connor, this volume). Archival collections may be further enriched by the knowledge that stems from their use in contemporary communities-of-practice. New knowledge about collections may be gained from the ways in which their contents are (re)constructed in new ways through performance, and from the ways in which their contents are curated in new ways when deposited in local content management systems (Marett 2003; Treloyn and Charles 2015), of held on and shared between personal listening devices, or embedded in contemporary performance and story repertoire (Barwick 2017).

Case studies show how Indigenous practitioners are using archival recordings in diverse and innovative ways to support musical practice and in locally based collections and curations, revealing the complex ways in which Indigenous communities-of-practice come to terms with and leverage the legacies of collection and preservation practices to support musical practice and contemporary lives. It follows that archives that hold collections created for the purposes of preservation should not only continue to strive to find new ways to support community access, but—as part of this—learn from case studies of how communities of practice create new collections and use old ones so archives can revisit their own decisions regarding digital format, how and what metadata is linked across collections and archives, and how questions of access and stewardship are conceived of into the future.

5 Introduction to the Articles

The articles presented in this special issue provide perspectives from Australia and internationally regarding Indigenous cultural collections, with special though not exclusive reference to university research-based archives’ collections of Indigenous music and dance.

1. “Wongatha Heritage Returned – the digital future and community ownership of schoolwork from the Mount Margaret Mission School, 1930s–1940s” – Beth Marsden, Katherine Ellinghaus, Cate O’Neill, Sharon Huebner and Lyndon Ormond-Parker

This powerful article traces the complex process of identifying and engaging community in return of a university museum collection of historical childrens’ drawings, originally created by Wongatha children in Western Australia in the 1930s, during the early years of the Assimilation era. Tracing the provenance of the collection in its pathway to the University of Melbourne archives was essential to identifying and engaging contemporary Wongatha people, in an exemplary process implementing all five of the principles identified by the Indigenous Archives Collective’s position statement (right to know, cultural safety, consent, institutions as facilitators, advocacy) (Indigenous Archives Collective).

2. “Dancing with the Devil (Spirit): How Audiovisual Collections Reveal and Enact Social and Political Agency in Dance and Song (a Case from the Kimberley)” – Sally Treloyn, Rona Goonginda Charles and Pete Myadooma O’Connor

This article engages directly with how contemporary practitioners from the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia, including authors Charles and O’Connor, use and re-use archival materials from various sources to enliven contemporary performances of Junba, a public dance-song genre performed by Ngarrinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal people. The focus is on the Winjama Junba composed in the 1950s and 1960s by Watty Ngerdu, which like other cultural productions from First Nations performers and artists...
The authors provide a fine-grained case study of “slow appraisal” in the curation of an accidental collection, the CASM Archive, consisting of a wealth of historical material relating to the establishment and operations of this groundbreaking Indigenous-led academic unit established at the University of Adelaide in 1972 by Catherine Ellis and Leila Rankine, a time when the self-determination era of First Nations politics in Australia was just beginning. In 2018–2019, contemporary CASM students provided input into co-design and appraisal of the collection as they worked with University Archives staff as well as their academic supervisors, to fulfill roles across the archival spectrum, providing curatorial functions (archival appraisal, description and cataloguing), designated community (Indigenous community end-users) and potential future creators of new resources for the collection.


Moving to non-Australian Indigenous collections, this contribution provides intriguing detail on how another Australian university collection, the Music Archive at Monash University (based on materials originally collected by ethnomusicologist Margaret Kartomi and her collaborators since the 1980s), is being used by communities in Sumatra’s Aceh and Lampung provinces as a platform for revitalisation of Indigenous music practices following natural disasters (the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2011 volcanic eruption of Anak Krakatua). Beyond audiovisual and paper records, MAMU’s digital collection includes three-dimensional scans of traditional musical instruments, providing the possibility for revitalisation and modernisation of vulnerable traditions of practice.

5. “Saving Torwali music and dance: community led performance and ‘public’ archiving” – Mujahid Torwali and Jakelin Troy

The last contribution to the volume comes from two Indigenous scholars, Mujahid Torwali, a cultural activist for his Torwali group of Pakistan’s Swat valley, and Jakelin Troy, a Ngarigu scholar from Australia’s Snowy Mountains region. They have collaborated to present a Torwali perspective on the creation of a non-institutional “archive” using social media platforms to create, preserve and promote recordings of Torwali music and dance, still-evolving traditions of Indigenous cultural identity recently suppressed by social factors such as the Taliban occupation of 2008–2009 and the cultural dominance of other Pakistani languages and musical traditions. Without access to support from archival institutions, Torwali people are developing their own culturally safe ways to take control of the cultural record of their hitherto largely undocumented languages and artistic identities.

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