Archival Returns: Central Australia and Beyond

Edited by Linda Barwick, Jennifer Green, and Petronella Vaarzon-Morel.
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*A*rchival Returns: Central Australia and Beyond *is an exciting new volume that compiles a wide range of case studies about archival (digital) return and repatriation. The volume was generated from an Australian Research Council Linkage project primarily focused on areas in the purview of the Central Land Council (CLC) in Australia's Northern Territory. While the volume's focus expanded to include a wider geographic range, its origins in that region are showcased in the book's clear grounding in principles of Aboriginal sovereignty. The CLC, born out of Aboriginal land rights and justice movements, is a "representative body governed by 90 Aboriginal people elected from communities in the southern half of the Northern Territory," a territory where Aboriginal people make up a third of the local population and "Aboriginal people collectively own half of the land."[1]

Innovatively, the volume is ordered geographically; a map in the front preface illustrates how the chapters begin in Arrernte country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs)—the location of the Central Land Council offices—and move outward, first north through the Northern Territory, then south through Western Australia. This place-based orientation subtley reminds the reader of the physical distances and historical barriers lodged between communities and their historical knowledge through the colonial project; it also emphasizes the resonances archival documents can have when returned to, viewed in, and repurposed in community spaces and places.

Collectively, the assembled papers describe returns and uses of a variety of archival media formats in diverse relational, historical, and community contexts. Archival materials in the volume are animated in a wide range of language and cultural transmission and revitalization practices: dictionaries and language-learning websites; song books, dance camps, and performances; books; documentary films and film festivals; community mapping projects; bilingual education curricula; and the creation of community archives.

For *American Archivist* readers, many of the examples will rhyme with contemporary projects with Native American and Indigenous communities in the United States, as well as across the Americas. Indeed, as someone who has been working in this sphere in Native, Indigenous, and First Nations communities in Canada and the United States, I found many of the examples of use, major findings, and decolonizing recommendations for institutions uncannily similar

to what I have heard from community researchers and archivists here. Many Aboriginal researchers share their difficult experiences accessing their heritage collections or grappling with archival practices that are in direct conflict with Aboriginal needs. (I found myself jotting affirmative marginalia [in pencil] furiously—Yes! This! Vetting! Gatekeeping! Risks! Community archives! Building relationships!) We can benefit from reading and learning from our international colleagues about different tactics Indigenous communities take in battling colonial histories and information infrastructures, while recognizing what we share.

One small area for further elaboration could have been on the use of the term "repatriation," although its connotations may be less fraught in the Australian context. In the volume's introduction, the editors note that there are "competing views" about the terms "return" and "repatriation," and that, while some note a difference between the two terms, they prefer to use the term "return" (p. 3). They do not elaborate on the critique of the term "repatriation" (virtual or digital) when referring to the transfer of digital copies, nor do they reference the phrase "digital knowledge sharing."[2] They do not settle on a definition of "return," noting that some authors mean any kind of sharing of a digital copy,[3] while others mean a transfer of ownership,[4] and some mean the return of original copies[5] (p. 3). "Return" is therefore used as an umbrella term for a wide range of exchanges and relationships. This is arguably a strength of the volume, but it could have been worth characterizing more explicitly in each case, or in the introduction. The use of the two terms "return" and "repatriation" somewhat interchangeably throughout the volume is a bit confusing, perhaps in the US context where so much is influenced by NAGPRA legislation and the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*,[6] which distinguishes sharing of copies and repatriation (the editors note that the main legislation of import in the Australian context is Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has not been implemented legislatively in the Australian Commonwealth Government) (p. 9). It would have been worth teasing out these tensions a bit and perhaps contextualizing them further for international audiences.

The volume is edited by an interdisciplinary team: musicologist Linda Barwick, linguistic anthropologist Jennifer Green, and anthropologist Petronella Vaarzon-Morel. That interdisciplinarity, balanced by a number of Indigenous authors and voices throughout the volume, is a real strength. However, few authors appear to be archivists or archival scholars, and, as such, the volume may fall into the well-critiqued trap of obscuring archival labor, current archival movements in postcustodial and decolonizing practice, and broader critical archival studies approaches to these issues.[7]

Nevertheless, I would highly recommend the volume for any archivists working with Native and Indigenous archival materials, whether at colonial or

Tribal repositories. The examples here are sure to be inspiring intellectually, emotionally, and pragmatically.

Many of the firsthand accounts from Aboriginal researchers are both pleasantly frank and emotionally moving. Brenda Croft (chapter 9), for instance, describes in evocative language how reconnecting with archival documents generates "something visceral, almost physical, in the recognition of the mark making of loved ones no longer there" (p. 177). Yet, she describes the trauma they can evoke: she discusses securing copies of photographs of her grandmother, only to realize they are the racist, objectifying product of early twentieth-century medical anthropology, in which her grandmother was "subjected to abject debasement, dehumanized, stripped of dignity, savaged by and through the lens" (p. 184). The chapter also questions the ethics of donor restrictions, as Gurindji knowledge collected by anthropologists is held under "what seems like a bloody-minded 21st century rendition of paternalism and control" (p. 187). Chapter 2's interview with Shaun Angeles and Joel Liddle recounts the process of discovering that so much material, "such vast knowledge of our people," was held in archival collections. "[I]t has totally changed my life," says Angeles (p. 33). Yet so much is indecipherable without thorough knowledge of both Arrernte language and linguistic documentation, which in turn requires working with professional linguists (p. 35). And many community members feel prevented from accessing these materials due to "closed-door" policies and lack of elite academic training (p. 37).

Many of the challenges facing Aboriginal communities, and approaches to combating them, illuminated here will be useful to archivists working amid similar colonial legacies and moves toward decolonizing practices. Chapters on technical infrastructures to better accommodate Aboriginal research, such as Mukurtu CMS (chapter 8), the Daly Languages Project/LibraryBox (chapter 15), Ara Irititja (chapters 13 and 14), may provide helpful pragmatic and sociotechnical models for working with materials.

The examples presented in *Archival Returns* showcase the impacts—positive and negative—archival materials and their stewardship can have in communities; they provide roadmaps to better relationship-building and mutually beneficial exchanges between archives and communities. The editors have done justice to their goal of illustrating the complexity of meaning and relationships generated through digital archival returns.

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Notes

1   See the CLC's website at https://www.clc.org.au/articles/cat/about, captured at https://perma.cc
    /787W-5J33.

2   Although it is cited in Kimberly Christen's chapter on Mukurtu, "'The Songline Is Alive in
    Mukurtu': Return, Reuse, and Respect." See Timothy B. Powell, "Digital Knowledge Sharing:
    Forging Partnerships between Scholars, Archives, and Indigenous Communities," *Museum
    Anthropology Review* 10, no. 2 (2016): 66–90, https://doi.org/10.14434/10.14434/mar.v10i2.20268.

3   See Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," *American Archivist* 74, no.
    1 (2011): 185–210, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.74.1.4233nv6nv6428521; Robert C. Lancefield,
    "Musical Traces' Retraceable Paths: The Repatriation of Recorded Sound," *Journal of Folklore
    Research* 35, no. 1 (1998): 47–68, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3814785.

4   Jane Anderson, "Indigenous Knowledge, Intellectual Property, Libraries and Archives: Crises
    of Access, Control, and Future Utility," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 36, no. 2 (2005):
    83–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2005.10721250.

5   Edward Garrett, "Participant-driven Language Archiving," *Language Documentation and Description*
    12 (2014): 68–84, http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/138.

6   Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p, captured at
    https://perma.cc/QW8K-7VN7. Also see Jennifer R. O'Neal, "Respect, Recognition, and Reciprocity:
    The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials," in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in
    the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2014),
    125–42.

7   See Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual
    Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction* 16, no. 1 (2016), https://escholarship.org/uc/
    item/7bn4v1fk; Michelle Caswell, Ricardo L. Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, "Critical Archival
    Studies: An Introduction," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017):
    1–8, https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.50; and Suzanne Fischer, "Nota Bene: If You 'Discover'
    Something in an Archive, It's Not a Discovery," *The Atlantic* (2012), http://www.theatlantic.com
    /technology/archive/2012/06/nota-bene-if-you-discover-something-in-an-archive-its-not-a
    -discovery/258538, captured at https://perma.cc/9KBL-GGXP.