

Reading Old Documents Hurts Me: Decolonising Archives

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Artwork by Chela Alvarado



What is an Archive ?

- The archive is where the most important information is stored
- A safe-keeping place for historical documents and records,
- Information about a place, institution or group of people
- Employee records or financial information
- A language centre, or Aboriginal Corporation keeps archives too
- A keeping place, stories, photos, maps, artefacts, videos and recordings
- Safe for future generations – containing priceless information and records about people and groups of people
- Sometimes archives represent the only available records of family history
- *Aborigines Act 1905*, Chief Protectorate of Aborigines: legislated every aspect of First Nations' lives and sanctioned recording-keeping on these lives
- State Library of WA – Storylines ; State Records Office
- Detailed information and records on families and people
- Must apply for permission to view



Archiving and Ethics

- In some case, archiving is an act of colonisation (Thorpe, 2019)
- Records about First Nations' people created and stored without consent – or unethically
- May be the only place this information is found
- Linguists, historians and archivists are now seeing record-keeping differently
- Accepting the reality of unethical information and information gathering
- Ownership and governance needs to be reassessed and redesigned – recognise harm in their collection and creation
- Recognise trauma in accessing, and very existence
- Act to minimise harm
- This process is referred to as Decolonising an Archive

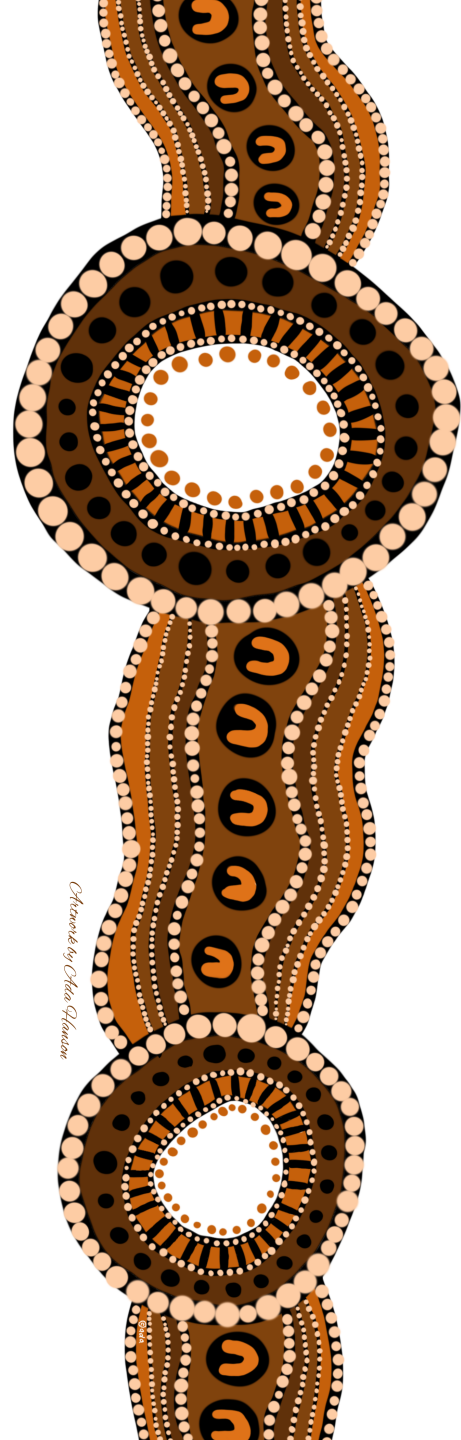


Archiving and Ethics

- Decolonise these keeping places, make them ethical, and accessible
- Decolonisation is a process engaging with colonialism at multiple levels (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021)
- Critical understanding of underlying assumptions, motivations and storage of knowledges not owned by the collectors
- Falls to non-indigenous people to decolonise (Bennett, 2023)

The Decolonised Archive

- Places the safety of Indigenous users at the forefront of its presentation
- Reduces the amount of harm faced by indigenous users
- Efforts have been taken to ensure safety (Ward & Wisnicki, 2019).
- Considers trauma and the possibility of re-traumatising First Nations' users
- complex process.
- Archival manager: considers physical access space; methods of access; language and linguistics used therein
- Contains ethically-sourced material
- Provenance and copyright – ensures cultural ownership and access
- Viewing rights
- Marks sensitive material
- Trauma-informed manner



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WANGKA KANYILKU

Warning × *Press to enter website*

**First Nations people are warned that
this website may contain images,
sounds and videos of deceased
persons**

Welcome

THE GOLDFIELDS ORIGINAL LANGUAGE CENTRE ABORIGINAL CORPORATION'S (GALCAC) WEBSITE!

(ROCO).

GALCAC's role is to work alongside speakers to record, linguistically analyses and database the First Nations languages of the Goldfields, WA, region in order to create preservation and use documents such as lexical databases, dictionaries and grammars.

peak body for the

Incorporated in 2020, Cultural Organisation



Ethics, Ownership and Consent

- Records about Indigenous Australians traditionally gathered and kept without their consent
- Subsequently owned by non-indigenous researchers (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021)
- Brings up questions around the ethics of ownership and the governance of an archive that does not allow access to the Indigenous people research is about
- A decolonised archive recognises non-indigenous cultures do not own Indigenous knowledges (Thorpe, 2019)
- Decolonising archives first step: Ensuring records are collected in an ethical matter
- Ethical archiving means informed consent.



Ethics: Informed consent

- Depositors understand the conditions of the contract they are entering into
- Consider any language barriers and overcome (this includes deposit forms)
- Onus of removal of barriers belongs to the collector
- This includes translation and interpretation (forms of deposit)
- Depositors or subjects direct viewing rights and access
- Provides peace of mind for the depositor(s)
- Provides copies of materials, in any format, to depositors
- Store consent forms with the record/materials
- Ensures provenance, data sovereignty and provides assurances as to the ethics of collection
- Guarantees safety of information
- Integrity of the system, and archiving body
- If provenance questioned, or tested, material is safe
- Protects the archive and archive managers



Ethics: Informed Consent

Deposit of Material with GALC

Depositor's name:

Postal address:

Residential address:

Email:

phone:

Language:

Associated incorporated body (if any):

Date deposit made:

Place deposit made:

Topic of deposited materials:

Why are you depositing your material with GALCAC?

Names of all people who own the material:

I/we agree that this material may be used for the following purposes:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Knowledge and Ownership

- Unethical methods of collection, othering Ways of Knowing are acts of colonisation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021)
- Positioning of Western cultures as authorities on Indigenous sciences minimizes other Ways of Knowing
- Fre (2018) argues modern western science is rooted in Indigenous principles
- Recognises First Nations' scientists, farmers and historians as experts of their own cultures
- A decolonised archive gives ownership of these knowledges to Indigenous people
- Records them as sharing or providing knowledge to westerners
- Removing colonist structures includes assessment of knowledges for validity and cultural sensitivity
- Includes ensuring that knowledge is kept for those permitted to know it
- Men's business, Women's business, song, dance, ceremony



Knowledge and Ownership

- Items whose ownership or ethics cannot be determined, must be ascertained
- Follow culturally appropriate guidelines in this process
- Speak to native title groups, family for these answers
- Items that still cannot be assessed after these steps, must be removed from public viewing
- A decolonised archive recognises First Nations' people are the experts in sensitivity and viewing rights (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021)



Reducing harm

- A decolonised archive is one that has been audited for offensive or harmful material
- Such material may cause further trauma to Indigenous users
- May come in the form of: photos; videos or recordings of sensitive practices; documents and files containing information about family members and documents that discuss policy concerning Indigenous people
- As before, items that cannot be provenanced, need to be removed. This includes ephemera and other artefacts
- Organisational audits target offensive language and wording, with the aim of removing such from the archive
- This reduces likelihood of harm to users
- If there are items with offensive material that cannot be removed (government documents) placing further warnings on individual items prepares users
- Users can then decide for themselves if they wish to view, being informed of the risks



Reducing Harm

- First Nations' people are at risk of further trauma in an archive
- Harm may come from unfamiliar reference to family members
- Trauma of having decisions made for you and about you
- It can be very harmful to read your family's history written from an historical or scientific perspective (Davis, 2022)
- Not finding information can also cause harm
- Archive staff with knowledge of trauma-informed care
- Consider the archive space
- Consider literacy levels and levels of comfort navigating unfamiliar technologies
- Building accessibility
- Government buildings are places of harm for First Nations' people (Davis, 2022)
- A quiet place is a good place



Recognising Colonist Structures

- Non-Indigenous archivists exist within structural privileges of colonisation
- Be aware of perpetuating these structures
- Decolonising an archive means non-indigenous archivists are attempting to undo entrenched structures that disadvantage First Nation's people,
- This has occurred within the same space has allowed for and acts to further their own privilege.
- Cultural safety policy and education may assist non-Indigenous understanding of these
- Onus for education on non-Indigenous staff, not the user or Indigenous employees (Bennett, 2022)
- Consider unconscious bias and ways to support Indigenous archive users
- Education and policy



Organisation-wide Education

1. Encouraging staff to undertake cultural competency training (or by making such training a requirement of employment)
 2. Conducting an organisational 'cultural audit'. This refers specifically to archives, but organisations will gain benefit from auditing their ethical practice in all areas of business management.
 3. Developing and implementing a workplace cultural safety policy.
 4. Working from a place where multiple traditions of knowing are celebrated, rather than a unitary system of knowledge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). By extension, this process may come to embody other ways of being.
- Consider other safety policies like; DEI and LGBTQI
 - Cultural Safety Policy - ensures the right to cultural safety for indigenous employees



GALCAC Best Practice

- Cultural Safety Policy (CSO)
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Policy (DEI)
- Cultural sensitivity warnings
- removing harmful and racist language
- Removing harmful, racist culturally ignorant tags in favour of culturally appropriate labels
- Out - black magic, mysticism and witch doctor
- In- spirituality, ceremony and dreaming, tjukurrpa, and Indigenous Heritage and Law



Conclusion

- More than ticking boxes or feel-good exercises
- Requirement for any organisation keeping records or research on indigenous history and its peoples
- Archive population, record creation and storage is complicit in production of pain, trauma and harm to First Nations people
- Decolonised archives actively resist further propagation of harm
- Addressing ways in which records are kept and referred is one way to recognise and address historical traumas.
- Researchers and archivists have professional and moral obligation to ensure cultural safety of archives and archiving systems



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