Reading old documents hurts me: Archival Trauma and Creating Safe Access Space
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For businesses and community organisations, the archive is where the most important information is stored. It is a place for the safe-keeping of historical documents or records, providing information about a place, institution or group of people. Depending on the business of the organisation, an archive is where documents like employee and financial records are stored. For a university, historical society, government departments and even language centres, items with historical or cultural importance are stored in an archive.

For a language centre, or other aboriginal corporations, this may include photos, videos, stories (both audio and transcribed), family trees and even ephemeral items like artefacts, paintings and weavings that have historical, cultural or familial value. Depending on the size of the collection, an archive will contain priceless information about the history and culture of a group or groups. For First Nations' people in Australia, archives are of particular importance as they may represent the only known records of family histories, and therefore the only way some families are able to trace their ancestors. In this respect consider archives like Storylines at the State Library of Western Australia and those records held by the West Australian State Records Office. As detailed as they are, these records were collected and stored unethically. The *Aborigines Act 1905* provided for the care of First Nations' people. This legislation came to mean keeping records on the lives and movements of every First Nations' person in the colony. The *1905 Act* gave the State the authority to do this, without the consent of the people they were keeping records about. In Western Australia these records are held by the State Records Office and are considered restricted. Anyone wishing to access these records, must apply for permission.

This in and of itself is worth considering critically. These records, were created and kept without the consent of the subjects of these records. Further, First Nations' people must apply for permission to view records about their own family. In respect to colonisation, the creation, storage and use of information about indigenous people, their history and their families in archives without consultation, consent or even access to said archives is an act of colonisation (Thorpe, 2019). Linguists, historians and archivists now understand that the ethics of these records is questionable. Subsequently, it is becoming increasingly apparent to researchers and archivists that much of the information and knowledge held in museums, libraries, universities and government departments has been gathered and kept in an unethical manner (Wilkins, 1992). It follows that ownership and governance of these collections need to be re-assessed and re-designed to recognise the harm caused in circumstances of their creation, and the continuing trauma to First Nations' people who try to access these archives. In the domain of record keeping, this is referred to as Decolonising Archives. Decolonisation is a process which engages with colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers and archivists, one of these levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research methods, the practice of collecting knowledges and the subsequent storage of these knowledges (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2021: Riley, 2021). Decolonisation praxis demands that responsibility for this falls to the non-indigenous researchers who collected, and benefitted from the information. It is not the responsibility of Indigenous people to reverse the effects of colonisation (Bennett, 2023).

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Where colonisation operated in an absence of physical, mental and spiritual well-being of Indigenous people, a decolonised archive is an archive that places the safety of Indigenous users at the forefront of its presentation. This means considerations have been made to reduce the amount of harm faced by Indigenous users of the archive. Efforts have been taken by the organisation managing the archive to make sure Indigenous users feel safe when they access items in the archive (Ward & Wisnicki, 2019).

In its most simple form, this may include a cultural warning that must be acknowledged before users are able to enter the archive. However, a cultural warning is not enough to deem an archive decolonised. It is merely a process used to draw the user's attention to the nature of the material and prepare someone for the likelihood of finding harmful data (S. Hanson, personal communication, 7 August, 2023). For archivists, a cultural warning is the first step of creating a safe place for First Nations' users. Preventing further harm of First Nations' users by decolonising an archive is a complex process. The archival manager must consider the physical access space and methods of access, as well as the language and linguistics used therein. A decolonised archive is an archive that contains ethically-sourced material and records that are provenanced and copyrighted to include cultural ownership. It assures access for the copyright owners, and protects records from being accessed by individuals and organisations without viewing rights. Lastly, a decolonised archive marks material which may cause trauma and makes provisions to ensure access occurs in a trauma-informed manner.

Records about Indigenous Australians, and research on Indigenous culture and language was traditionally gathered and subsequently owned by non-indigenous researchers (Tuhiwai Smith, 2019). This brings into focus questions around access and ownership of these types of records. Indigenous Australians are one of the most researched communities in the world however, many of these records remain out of reach for those whose history, tjukurrpa and families have been the subject of such records.

A decolonised archive acknowledges the circumstances in which information about Indigenous subjects was collected, and recognises western cultures and societies do not own information (Thorpe, 2019). Ensuring records are collected in an ethical manner is a first step to decolonise the knowledge held in the archive. Ethical archiving means informed consent. That is, depositors and research subjects understand the conditions of contract they are entering into. If there are language differences that present a boundary to that consent, the onus is on the collector to provide interpreters that will remove that boundary. If need be, deposit forms, forms that detail the conditions of supply, will be provided in the preferred language of the depositor or owner of the knowledge being shared. Depositors are given the opportunity to direct access rights. If the material is sensitive, or private, the depositor may wish to restrict access to family members or trusted persons only. Archives should then make provision for this in their storage. This practice is not only ethical, but provides peace of mind to the depositor in the case of sensitive or private family histories.

It is important to ensure archive records are protected in this manner, for the organisation and the person sharing knowledge. It will ensure the safety of information held within the archive, integrity of the system, and archiving body in general. In the event of provenance being questioned, strict organisation policy around the deposit of materials will also protect the archive and managers of the archive.

Best practice around depositing includes providing depositors, owners of knowledge and subjects of research copies of the material being archived. This can be in written or digital format, or both depending on the wishes of the person. This guarantee is included on the consent form. The form that is provided to anyone who is about to enter into a research project where knowledge will be shared, or providing records to the archive for safe-keeping.

Consent forms are stored in the archive with the associated material as part of the record. This process, though stringent, ensures provenance, data sovereignty and provides assurances as to the ethics of collection.

A decolonised archive recognises that unethical methods of collection of First Nations' knowledge and Othering of ways of knowing and being are, in and of themselves, a form of colonisation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). The positioning of western cultures as authorities on scientific, anthropological and ethnobotanical wisdom minimises Indigenous ways of knowing, placing them in a position of inferiority to western knowledges and sciences. In fact, it can be argued that many elements of modern western science are partly rooted in Indigenous knowledge principles (Fre, 2018). A decolonised archive gives ownership of Indigenous knowledge to Indigenous cultures, validating ways of being that are not Western. A decolonised archive recognises First Nations scientists, farmers, historians and anthropologists as the experts of their own cultures and that these cultures have something very relevant to add to the conversation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). It records them as the owners of information shared with non-indigenous records collectors and researchers.
Removing colonist structures from an archive includes the assessment of knowledges for validity and cultural sensitivity. First Nations' cultural norms acknowledge that some information and practices are kept for the owners of that knowledge specifically. Men's or Women's business, song and even ceremony or dances can be culturally sensitive and should be viewed only by those with permission to do so. If historical records have been logged without appropriate guidelines for restrictions, this needs to be rectified. Finding the appropriate person or persons to assess historical records of unknown origin can be a complex process. The most culturally-appropriate way to do this is by approaching members of the family line or language group for advice. First Nations' people are the experts in advising viewing and sensitivity restrictions for their own history (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Items that cannot be assessed, or for which questions about provenance or cultural sensitivity remain should be marked accordingly and removed from public viewing.

Further to this, a decolonised archive is an archive that has been audited for offensive or harmful material that may cause trauma for Indigenous users. Harmful material can come in the form of: racist or offensive language; photos of deceased relatives or friends; photos, videos or audio material of sensitive practices; documents and other files that contain sensitive information about family members, information on traumatizing historical events (like massacres, or discussions about harming First Nations people); documents that discuss government policy around Indigenous people and even artefacts and ephemera that may hold cultural, spiritual or historical significance to First Nations people (Thorpe, 2019).
As established earlier, First Nations' people are the experts of their own history and culture. If an archive contains items whose provenance is questionable, this needs to be rectified. The same applies for ephemeral items held in the collection. Indigenous historians, language groups and native title bodies should be able to assist with provenance or ownership. At the very least, they will be able to direct an archive manager towards the correct place for gaining answers to these questions (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

Conducting an organisational audit of the archive, targeting offensive and harmful wording with the aim removing it from the records is another way to reduce the possibility of further harm for Indigenous archive users. Where there are items such as photos or documents where wording cannot be replaced for less-offensive terms, placing further warnings on specific records prepares users for what they will see if they decide to view the material. By doing

this, archive users are given the opportunity to make their own decisions, in an informed manner.

Informed decision making is paramount. A culturally unsafe archive, has been shown to re-traumatise Indigenous people (Davis, 2022). Many First Nations people who wish to access an archive in order to learn about family or cultural history are at risk of being further traumatised by what they find when they access an archive that is not decolonised, or where no efforts have been made to consider the safety of Indigenous users.
This harm may come in the form of: photos of deceased persons; the use of the name of a deceased person; and outdated language. Users may experience harm from seeing their relatives or family members referred to in a way that is upsetting or unfamiliar to them. Indigenous people are still dealing with the trauma of decisions that were made about how their families and families' lives and cultures were recorded for them. This includes how these records were written, kept and accessed. It can be very harmful to read your family's history written from an historical or scientific perspective (Davis, 2022).

Conversely, users may also experience harm if they do not find their relatives or the information they were looking for in the archive. First Nations' users hoping to find information about family and family history may experience further trauma if they cannot locate family members (Davis, 2022). This illustrates the need for archive staff and managers to have knowledge of trauma-informed care. In these instances best practice around archive access can include providing a safe, quiet and private place for users to access the archive, as well as having a staff member available to assist users who may need assistance with literacy or computer literacy (Davis, 2022). Archivists should not assume users will know how to access and navigate technology like an online archive. Nor should they fail to consider differences in literacy levels. Indigenous users may feel more comfortable in their heritage language, than Standard Australian English and this should be taken into consideration.

A decolonised archive is one where accessibility of all kinds and at all levels is considered. Even buildings and office spaces that house archives can be traumatising for Indigenous users. Historically government buildings and European-style architecture of the colonial era are associated harm and trauma for Indigenous people (Davis, 2022). Sometimes the mere act of entering these buildings may induce traumatic memories and feelings of harm for Indigenous users. In these instances, locating the archive in a quiet place may serve to help any users who have had a confronting experience.

Non-indigenous archivists engaged in the decolonisation of archives are navigating a difficult situation. As persons who have never been exposed to racist elements or structures that continue positions of power and privilege, non-indigenous archivists need to be aware that their cultural heritage means they have benefitted from these structures. For these reasons, there is a likelihood of perpetuating colonist structures by the manner in which archives are populated. The act of decolonising an archive means non-indigenous archivists are essentially attempting to undo entrenched structures that disadvantage First Nation's people, in the same space has allowed for and acts to further their own privilege. In this respect education is essential. Having a cultural safety policy and providing staff with training in cultural safety and awareness is one way an organisation can protect archivists from causing, and archive users from experiencing further harm. Again, the onus of education should be on the organisation and the archivist working for that organisation, and not the user (Bennett, 2023). By nature of their privilege, non-indigenous archivists entering material into an archive may

not be aware of the potential harm of some aspects of the archive and archival entries. Therefore, the concept of cultural safety and educating non-indigenous archivists on cultural safety provides a pathway for people to consider their own unconscious bias, as well as to build support and awareness of Indigenous cultural values and ways of knowing (Thorpe, 2019).

When it comes to archives and records, Indigenous people are dealing with ethical decisions that were made by colonisers on how their families' lives were recorded, kept and accessed. This runs counter to ethical considerations around the ways in which these materials should be handled, recorded and accessed (Thorpe, 2019).

Education for archive staff and managers may include:
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.

Where polices such as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and those aimed at protecting members of the LGBTQI community (for example) are becoming commonplace in the workforce, a Cultural Safety Policy that ensures the right to cultural safety for Indigenous employees should also be a priority (GALCAC recognises that cultural safety policies can include cultural immigrants and new Australians, however as this paper is specifically aimed at reducing harm for Indigenous archive users, wider policies of cultural safety will not be discussed here).

Researchers and archivists need to consider a more inclusive view of heritage, one that is framed within an Indigenous world view (Nichols & Smith, 2020). To this end, the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre is taking steps to decolonise business practice across the organisation, not just within the archive. Some of these steps include: developing a Cultural Safety and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Policies; placing cultural sensitivity warnings on the archive home page as well as removing harmful and racist language appearing within records saved within the archive. For example, removing tags like 'black magic, mysticism and witch doctor and replacing them with more culturally-accurate and appropriate labels like: spirituality, ceremony and dreaming, tjukurrpa, and Indigenous Heritage and Law.

Conclusion
A decolonised archive is more than ticking a box, and cannot be described as a 'feel good' exercise. A decolonised archive should be a requirement for any organisation that keeps records or research on indigenous history and its peoples. It is a way of acknowledging the complicity of archive population, record creation and storage as complicit in the production of pain, trauma and harm to First Nations people. It is a system of operation that actively resists further propagation of harm. It acts to mediate pain caused by colonial records by acknowledging and repairing old practices (Ward & Wisnicki, 2019). Subjects of research recorded or spoken about in the archive are people, not scientific data. For Australia to undo its colonist past, addressing the ways in which records are kept and referred is one way to recognise and address historical traumas. More than this, for a research organisation, ethics

and ethical research are paramount. Therefore while it is easy to say the ones who benefit from a culturally safe archive are first and foremost the indigenous users, it should also be remembered that as researchers and protectors of research, archivists have a professional and moral duty to ensure the cultural safety of archives and archiving systems.

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