

Reflections on the Archive
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Abstract

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1. Introduction

For anyone working in the fields of language and culture, the archive is as central and as important as any of the more prominent, public outcomes of our work. In the twenty-first century, society has gained a greater awareness of the realities of life in what have been labelled ‘post-colonial’ environments. It will be no news to anyone working in the social sciences that our fields are in the period which future historians may very well label the ‘early decolonisation period’. In this new normal, individuals and groups are not just talking about colonialism, but making public comment, passing judgement and questioning the structures embedded in a system that provides privilege and freedoms for one group at the expense of another. While the decolonising conversation is taking place throughout all areas of language and culture work, the archive is an area on which considerable attention can be paid.

The archives of every organisation involved in language and culture, from the small research body to national and international archives must therefore be approached with the colonial history of archiving in mind, and the goal of reconstructing archiving in a post-colonially informed way. Across the world, the dominance of non-indigenous colonising groups gave the Empire the power to decide who was remembered, and the means by which this was done. Knowledge is power, and empires have historically acquired theirs on the backs of indigenous labour, through fortunes created by pillaging indigenous resources and with cultural knowledges stolen from indigenous elders and knowledge holders. As rightful owners of the knowledges being recorded, Indigenous research subjects gave no permission, provided no input and received no recognition of their contribution to the success of colonialism. In the end, provenance was irrelevant because the Empire gave itself the power to write history, and in their version, First Nations contributors and owners were conveniently left out. The move away from colonialist attitudes and practices is in the limelight in different fields to various degrees around the world, and Australia is no exception. Indeed, Australia is a country for which movements of decolonisation are particularly salient and necessary, and this discussion has been taking place since at least the nineteen-eighties.

2. What exactly is an archive?

While almost everyone has certainly heard of or even accessed archives to some degree, the depth of their complexity, the protocols and philosophy surrounding them, and their importance to society are often severely overlooked. In essence, an archive is an accumulated body of information, records, material, and objects, intentionally collected and organised to preserve them as closely as possible to their original form, and to facilitate future access. This does not however simply mean a room or warehouse packed with disparate items, but involves a serious, considered, and orchestrated system of organisation. The methods of this collection vary by culture and era, and continue to evolve, with new approaches emerging through experiences as well as the academic field of library/archival studies. The change of greatest magnitude within living memory is the introduction of digitisation in the latter half of the 20th century, which has shifted the European-style archiving paradigm to an unprecedented level of almost limitless mechanical reproduction. Anything which is archived must be done so with a variety of important factors kept in mind, including the preservation of physical items against decay or accident, backups, and perhaps most importantly the attachment of essential metadata and links between items so that they can be

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understood more deeply as a part of the greater whole. This latter aspect is where the clearest distinctions between European and non-European methods of archiving may clash with the greatest ferocity. Clearly, to be an archive involves a great deal of forward looking decision-making, design, application of clear and well defined and defensible protocols, with the greatest purpose of any archiving endeavour being providing future accesses of the archive with the fullest and most navigable access to them. They are not simply created as a locked cabinet for storing things, but are living repositories that must be carefully and proactively maintained. This care and maintenance is importantly not limited to the artefacts and knowledge themselves, but to the systems that keep them safe and accessible as well. These too are developed within a cultural framework which determines what is and isn't important to remember, and like all aspects of culture, must be transmitted from the old to the young, or from the experienced to the novice.

3. European-style Keeping

British-style archiving did not assign much, if any, value to cultural articulations of memory.

Stanley H. Griffin (2024)

The archive is a powerful statement of belonging (Douglas et al., 2024). But the circumstances in which a record is created demonstrates how one kind of history is valued more than another. Historically, when two approaches to knowledge preservation encountered each other, the local ancient archiving methods honed over generations were often severed, at times deliberately, at others as a painful by-product of the drive to 'civilise' others in one's own image. Consider the difference between the archival collections of Sir Joseph Banks and that of an Indigenous resident of a remote West Australian mission from the 1950s; one is for prosperity and acclaim, while the other is for study and scrutiny. The descendants of Sir Joseph Banks may take comfort in the fact that their ancestor is being remembered for his contributions to history and the field of botany. The descendants of an Indigenous woman, forcibly relocated to a mission, denied her culture, language and connection to country may not consider the record of their ancestor with the same level of pride and celebration. Further, one imagines that the Banks family may have had some input into what documents and items were stored in this collection, whereas Indigenous subjects were certainly not afforded the same privilege. Herein lies an important consideration; for what purpose were these records collected, and who has their existence benefitted up until now? The answer will provide direction for institutions looking to make their collections more accessible to First Nations research subjects.

What traditional European archiving does is preserve data, but where it succeeds in creating stable records, it can fail to establish the meaning of data. While previous generations of linguists, anthropologists, etc were using extractive processes of targeting the information they believed to have the most significance, the meanings and significances attributed to the data by the groups that they mattered to the most were ignored. Naturally, one of the key methods by which meaning is held by one element of culture is through its connections with other elements, and by recognising its place or places within the wide web of cultural elements. This is a feature that has all too often been overlooked, and the European archiving tradition provides little scope for this essential need.

Institutions should be aware that the conditions in which material was collected will be correlational to how accessing the material affects the mental and emotional health of the First Nations user. Data

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collected with research input, and informed consent on the part of research subjects will have a more positive effect on users than records created without consent or knowledge of the informant. Records where the informant is regarded as some kind of scientific subject dehumanises the informant and may cause harm to First Nations users accessing the material at a later date (Thorpe, 2019). Just because the subject has passed away and won't get to read the record, doesn't mean the end of its potential to cause harm. Decolonisation has forced institutions to evaluate their understanding of IDS and how their archival management systems stack up in terms of appropriate processes, cultural safety, access and governance (Rainie et al., 2019).

It is a critical point that the subjects of this Remembering were not asked for their permission, nor did they get a say in what was taken from them in the name of history, or how it was collected. In the Goldfields of Western Australia the acquisition of these knowledges meant the difference between life and death. The violent theft of information pertaining to the location of water sources from First Nations people in the Goldfields by non-indigenous settlers meant life for the newcomers and death for those from whom this knowledge was taken (Hanson, 2014). Once acquired, these knowledges went through a process that effectively reassigned their ownership. Information and memories were analysed, assessed and categorised. Stolen data was mined for the most valuable parts and typically Othered (Thorpe, 2019). Here, the ever-present colonial phenomenon of Othering took place, in which a group is conceptually marked as distinct from those controlling or describing society or information. Othering is frequently the intellectual foundation and assumed justification for fetishising, exploiting, or outright violence against the Other (Mountz, 2009). The Othering served to remove its specific and unique cultural value by measuring it through wholly-foreign lens, while assessment involved weighing data as right or wrong according to the morals of a non-indigenous society. In categorising, knowledge was Othered and devalued and stored in archives and institutions; places the traditional owners could not access. A great deal of our work today centres on historical records created long before the term *decolonisation* entered the mainstream. While these older works of the twentieth century and earlier in both linguistics and archiving have been and remain invaluable, they were created by people with specific goals inseparable from their own cultural understandings of what knowledge is.

As with traditional language, spirituality, family makeup, dress, housing, and law, among others, the European administrative modes of archiving were either offered or forced as the only possible option, shattering not only the information in the traditional libraries of the mind and ephemeral transmission, but the very methods of maintaining the libraries themselves. The forced removal of children from families in Australia, Canada, and the United States of America removed children not only from their homes, but from their opportunities to engage with and understand the systems of knowledge that were their right during the critical period of their upbringing. These removals truly were, as has been said before, the equivalent of burning down a library.

One argument sometimes encountered from those who have not engaged deeply with the histories of these events is that these early linguists and archivists should be immune to criticism as the work they did is sometimes the only extant record of a language or cultural practice. This approach however ignores the fact that had the speech communities themselves been allowed to continue speaking their languages and archiving culture and history in their own culturally-defined way, these colonial archives and records would be far less useful. Indeed in many instances, the people

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creating these priceless records were at the forefront of the deliberate dismantling of the traditional records keeping systems. While the work of some missionary and colonial individuals and organisations might have left us beautifully carved statues of the past, we would prefer today to be able to touch the ancient trees cut down to make them.

This is not to say by any means that European modes of archiving are without merit, quite the contrary, however a post-colonial critique is necessary. Much like the early linguistic field work and description performed by missionaries and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the practices employed in the past can and should be criticised in light of deeper understanding of post-colonial methodologies, but their work is nevertheless invaluable as the most available record of some Australian languages. Modern linguists are fully aware that the works available to us today were at best deeply colonial and disconnected from the agency and intellectual sovereignty of the speech community, or at worst outright exploitative and demeaning. Yet the resources themselves, however gained are sometimes the most valuable and cherished records available today.

4. Indigenous ways of Keeping

Every culture is an archiving culture.

Stanley H. Griffin (2024)

In contrast, many non-text-based archiving systems developed outside of the European tradition approach the maintenance of knowledge in strikingly different ways. These approaches can often be communal, with the knowledge deliberately and carefully shared and curated among either the entire population of the group, or in clearly-defined subgroups, e.g. women's business, law business, sacred roles, midwifery. For Indigenous Australians, the practice of Keeping was done orally and performatively. This way of Keeping is completely at odds with Keeping practices of non-Indigenous groups, in which the nature of the archivist is a specialised field in which the archiving practices themselves are developed and fostered only by those who have archiving and librarianship as a primary role. In many First Nations Keeping systems, the mind is an archive, but the body is also an archive, if you know how to look. In the fringes of non-indigenous societies, tattoos relay personal histories on the bodies of owners (Baldaev, 2006). In the same way, cicatrise, circumcision and ceremonial body painting were a way of recording complex personhood on the Indigenous body. It is no accident that both non-indigenous and Indigenous forms of bodily marking have been Othered by a dominant non-indigenous culture. The tattooed and the Indigenous have long existed on the fringes of a society that does not place any value in bodily modification, or practises of remembering through the body.

5. Learning from outside the discipline

Although many of us may see ourselves as linguists who archive rather than archivists of language material, which is a reasonable description, however the centrality of the endurance of the data that we collect and use, and the works derived from them must be recognised at all stages of the language work process. Good academic practice sees organisation and correct labelling of data as a fundamental, however this may end at the point of personal practicality, with no attention given to its navigability were someone else to engage with them. Everything that we do as linguists and

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workers within the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (GLAM) space is potentially of extremely important and personal use to people long after we have retired and been laid to rest. Our names may be forgotten, but the condition of the data as it passes through our hands and into those yet to be born must always be kept in mind.

Sexton (Douglas et al., 2024) describes archivists as caregivers who are bound to records, creators, donors, subject, users and other archivists and archiving communities. If this is true then archivists, as caregivers, will afford special care and attention to Indigenous users and subjects of archives in a heretofore colonised structure. While our own fields are each undergoing the adolescent growing pains as we aim for post-colonial maturity, it is as always of great importance that we take the opportunity to learn from the decolonising journeys undertaken by fields outside of our own. While every linguist on some scale develops an archiving practice of their own or adopts that of an organisation they are associated with, the importance of the act of archiving, and of the nature of archives and how they are understood by *all* individuals connected through them is easily overlooked. The growing trend in linguistics and anthropology in full swing today have taken understandings of language from a mechanical phenomenon to be simply doused in ethanol and pinned through the heart for display, to the recognition that its best preservation method is to foster its freedom to fly from flower to flower. In parallel, the archiving world has undergone a similar wave of decolonisation where forward-looking individuals and organisations within the field have spent the last decades re-evaluating the European text-centric model of archiving.

6. There's more than one way to archive

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message.

Marshall McLuhan (1964)

An important factor that linguists fundamentally acknowledge while contradictorily also often overlook is that the written word is but *one* system of preserving knowledge. The written word is the cultural vehicle in Europe at large, while a variety of alternative vessels continue to exist in cultures elsewhere, and these alternative modes of knowledge maintenance have been ignored or even actively demonised. While linguists are often more aware of these ideas than other fields, the written word is still at the centre of how we make meaning through our work. The impossibility in the European mind of recording and maintaining knowledge outside of the brick and steel of the written document is matched by the inverse perspective of people immersed in non-text-based knowledge cultures: For some, the written word is unable to satisfactorily record events and ideas where dance, song, and image are the superior media.

The European archiving tradition is, like all cultural practices, both an outcome of culture, and a contributing structure to the maintenance of that culture. While the written word is undeniably one of humanity's greatest achievements, the assumption that it is the perfected system of recording knowledge has been used historically as the tool of colonising groups, while the lands they claimed were already the established homes of people effectively preserving and growing knowledge with no writing systems. While in the twenty-first century we are consciously driving towards

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decolonising our methods and practises, the written word is still, somewhat unconsciously, the primary vehicle of our derived works. For those of us especially from a European background, the natural default method of archiving is one that places the written text centrally, but just like in every other facet of our work, we must recognise that the foundations of this practice are cultural, and by no means universal. Cultural practices thrive and are maintained by their continuous practice, and the European model of archiving is alive and well, although it is experiencing a renaissance of re-evaluation with a post-colonial goal.

Who decides what is worthy of being kept in an archive and the way that story is remembered? And whose cultural values guide decisions around the management of collections? Most importantly, the mode of archiving undertaken by anyone is a reflective manifestation inseparable from their own cultural understanding of knowledge, but more importantly its meaning. The arrival of colonisation in Australia meant that only non-indigenous methods of Keeping were recognised as valid. Non-indigenous societies value the written word and only trust memories held through this method. The body as an archive became an invalid method of remembering. So too did anything that was not, or could not be written down. Non-indigenous cultures devalue any kind of memory that cannot be held. These groups assign value to things: photographs; reels of film; tapes; newspapers; journal articles and artefacts, these ways of Keeping matter to European cultures. To this end, non-indigenous historians, ethno-botanists, anthropologists and linguists set about capturing knowledge and memory in writing, audio recordings, film and photography. These are acceptable methods of remembering. In this way, the dominant group authorised itself to decide what knowledges were worth remembering and how they would be remembered. Under this model, an oppressed minority group is will not be permitted to tell their story about the oppressor.

Colonialism prefers to forget aspects of their history that are less than flattering. The advantage of a written history means anything not written down, did not happen. Indigenous cultures remember (Himiona, 2024). One can fail to write events down and history may forget these things even happened, but the mind holds onto trauma and the body wears the scars. It is inaccurate to say there are no records about First Nations people, created by First Nations people. There are plenty, but they will not be found in forms that are familiar to non-Indigenous people. The stories of these groups exist, but will not be found inside the Keeping structures created by the oppressor, because these are spaces for approved memories only. The collection, storage, sharing and use of data has always been part of Indigenous culture, and data storage has historically taken diverse forms, including art, painting, dance, song and story (Rainie et al., 2019). Vast differences between cultural ways of recording history are echoed in the way First Nations and non-indigenous groups manage and keep these records and memories (Thorpe, 2019). The challenge for archivists in the throes of decolonising their systems is to make decisions and policy that are good for the longevity of the archive, but also for the cultural safety of First Nations people accessing the archive.

To many First Nations people, European archiving systems are alien monoliths, devoid of vehicles for which the medium is the message itself; where the story is not just told to the eye by visual engagement with the fabric, but the fabric itself is part of the information. In a photograph of a painting ochre is pure pigment, the real world object that triggers red pixels on a laptop screen. But the ochre that was cool and damp in the hand of the artist was sourced from someone with specific and deep ties to the artist, sourced from a place that itself has deep significance to the art being

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made. The European mode is a stark and bare phenomenon where the colours and sounds of meaning are rendered monochrome and silent.

7. Decolonising the archive

In post-colonial Australia, colonialism is a dirty word and no one is afraid to say it out loud. Within the academic sphere, the continued colonisation of First Nations knowledges and data is being called out and challenged. The next generation of Blak Australians are comfortable pushing back against non-Indigenous researchers and academics who are seen to be occupying spaces that do not belong to them, whether or not the GLAM industry is ready to listen. The harm caused by colonisation and the recognition that wealth and power was attained via the theft of Indigenous resources has resulted in calls for knowledges to be returned. Terms like Indigenous data sovereignty (IDS), linguistic sovereignty, and First Nations agency are gaining traction in the decolonising sphere and First Nations voices are among the loudest. The pressure is now on the GLAM industry to catch up. Indigenous Australians are pushing for data sovereignty and agency, demanding access to and ownership over records written about them but not by them and certainly not for them (Thieberger et al., 2024). In a decolonised practice, research is collected under direction from the groups being researched. It follows that when we decolonise GLAM spaces these records are available for researchers, but more importantly they become available to the subjects of that research. This is significant, not just ethically, but also because in some instances the historical records and files held by institutions are the only sources of information left. When this happens the data becomes even more precious to language groups, families and communities looking for answers. In this case it stands to reason that having access to these records is paramount. Protecting First Nations people from data that might cause distress is no longer a valid reason to withhold access. The practical application of decolonisation can provide safe access to archives and records.

8. So what next?

Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end.

Achille Mbembe (2002)

The essential solution is exactly what diverse fields around the world are gradually seeking to achieve today: the decolonisation of the archive. The nature of what the ideal post-colonial archive would look like is not something that can be presented here, for a variety of reasons. How this is undertaken will and should vary based on the conditions of the archive, region, culture, organisations, and individuals themselves, but there are some general features that are at the forefront of this process. The archives need to be established based on the archiving needs of the community, the individual users, and the organisations that work with them, so will differ radically between places and cultures. As organisations and institutions consider the steps they will take to decolonise their archive, taking the time to show a little extra care will benefit users and records management practitioners. By employing Slow Down procedures, institutions can ensure consultation and engagement with communities will play a greater role in the management of records (Thorpe, 2019). When institutions invest in their community, and take the time to engage in

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dialogue with their communities, they will be active in creating culturally safe spaces, both in their archive and within the community the archive exists. This dialogue needs to be held with First Nations people. Ideas that are sprung from discussions about cultural safety, without the input of First Nations people are not valuable ideas. In a decolonised archive, there is no room for a non-indigenous definition of cultural safety. Thus the aim for GLAM is to choose data governance and build archival policy better align with Indigenous values and views on management, agency and sovereignty (Rainie et al., 2019). First Nations people should be shaping the ways archives and archival policy is built. Rather than participating in past outdated practices that are informed by colonial collecting paradigms, which still Other First Nations people in collections (Thorpe, 2019).

As a basic set of ideas, these approaches may be best presented as a series of questions that can be asked when developing or adapting an archive system:

- ▶ Access:
 - ▶ Does the archive provide access to everyone that require access to it?
 - ▶ Are there distinct styles of access that cater best to the different needs of the individual accessing it? i.e., are there topics and records that are more sensitive and are therefore not meant to be accessed by members outside of certain groups? In which case, who decides who can and can't access these records?
 - ▶ At the same time, are there barriers in place that make people with a right to access reluctant, fearful, or frustrated when trying to access records because they do not have adequate clearance?
 - ▶ Does access require levels of computer literacy or ability to navigate administrative red tape that might be outside the immediate capability of people seeking to access the archive?
- ▶ Audience
 - ▶ Who is the audience? Are they academic researchers? Are they archivists? Are they administrators? Are they members of the public? Are they members of a specific ethnic or cultural group? What is the scope of difference between what the users of the archive are looking for?
- ▶ Recognition
 - ▶ Does your archive contain sensitive records that were originally created inappropriately? Was any given original record created in a way that could trigger traumatic experiences for someone accessing it today?
 - ▶ In what ways might the western archiving mode be alienating to members of your audience? Are there contrastive ways of organising information that might be more familiar to users?
- ▶ Design
 - ▶ How can the archive be laid out so that *meaningful connections* can be made?
 - ▶ Rather than linear ideas of how archives must function, are more web-like arrangements better at reflecting the complex connections between individuals, places, things, and ideas?
 - ▶ Does the design satisfy the purpose of the archive for everyone involved? Does it answer the questions asked by the technical staff as well as individual members of the community?

9. Conclusion

The growth of archiving technologies and how they are accessed will change enormously over the coming years, especially with the implementation of artificial intelligence in archiving procedures. As this paper is written from the perspective of linguists who archive rather than as archivists who do language work, we can merely begin to discuss these ideas, and a great deal of the drive for decolonising archives will come from archivists at the centre of the archiving field, and from the marginalised groups that have for too long been excluded from that same field. Together, the re-establishment of meaning as the core of archiving can be achieved, and the quality of all of our work will be all the better for it.

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