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Indigenous records: connecting, critiquing and diversifying collections

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Kirsten Thorpe is the Coordinator of the Indigenous Unit at State Library of New South Wales. She is passionate about creating spaces of engagement for Aboriginal people to connect with archival sources documenting their history. Kirsten's professional and research interests relate to the return of archival sources of material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the opportunities that the digital domain presents for communities to be actively involved in managing their cultural heritage resources. Kirsten is a descendant of the Worimi people of Port Stephens, New South Wales and is descended from the Manton, Feeney and Newlin families.

The management of Indigenous records and collections presents challenges to traditional archival methods and practice. Indigenous issues relating to the management of archives are important questions that should be discussed and considered broadly by the profession. In this paper, I will draw on my own professional and personal experiences of working as an Indigenous archivist to illustrate some of these challenges.

I will suggest that a reshaping and reinvention of methods needs to take place to acknowledge the many complex relationships that exist between Indigenous people and records, and to recognise the rights of individuals and communities to participate in decisions about archival management and practices. I will first consider these issues by discussing challenges that are presented in managing existing archival collections, followed by a discussion about the opportunities that exist in the digital domain for rich and diverse collections to be created that allow for multiple perspectives.

The ongoing impact of historical records on communities

I started my career as an archivist in the late-1990s, employed by State Records New South Wales (NSW) through an Indigenous cadetship program.[1] State Records NSW holds many significant records relating to Aboriginal people with one of the main collections being created by the former Aborigines Protection and Welfare Boards, 1883–1969 (the Boards). I spent a decade working with this collection of records, the majority of which are closed to public access owing to the sensitive and personal nature of the information they contain. The Boards records document the surveillance and control of Aboriginal people in the state of NSW: the regulation of finances, land, children and the movements of Aboriginal people on reserves.[2] It is a collection written *about* people; much of the language and themes used in the records are offensive in today's context and reflective of the period in history when they were written.[3]

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In the years I worked with this collection I was regularly confronted by the records and the trauma they caused to people who accessed them. Personally and professionally I had to build resilience within myself both to take care of people who entered the archive, and to take care of myself in the process. As I navigated backwards and forwards between the archive and clients – between the written record and the personal stories of people – it became evident that the experiences and oral memories of people differed greatly from the 'facts' documented in the records. This was a complex relationship as the records were both evidence of government and the legislation it was responsible for enacting, as well as being personal records documenting people's lives. I support the view that the Boards records are 'imperfect' evidence[4] because of the very complex nature of the history, experiences and decisions that they capture. During the period that I worked with this collection it was very evident to me that the archive continued to cause harm to people accessing it, and access to the records often raised more questions than they could answer.

Respecting privacy and creating safe spaces for further research

Access to the closed records of the Boards is through a system of mediated access. This is imperative in order to respect the privacy of individuals and families documented in the records. This traditional approach has however closed the records off to further analysis and has limited the exposure of the records for researchers to critique them. I believe that keeping the records locked up in this way gives them more power as tools of oppression. It allows the records to be viewed as an 'ultimate source of truth', disconnected from the personal stories and oral memories that might exist outside the archive. The research and investigation that may have taken place about these records sit outside the institution in other record repositories.[5] These collections should be linked, and archival systems created, to enable people the ability to provide a 'right of reply' to these types of records.[6] This is of particular importance where the records document systems of control or injustice to a community, as is the case with the records of the Boards. Although efforts have been made to index and further contextualise the Boards collections, there has to be a focus on finding culturally appropriate and suitable ways to broaden access and understanding of the records.[7]

Connecting, critiquing and diversifying records

In 2010, I left State Records NSW to join a team at the University of Technology, Sydney who were establishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Archive (ATSIDA). This was a transformational time for me working as an archivist, stepping outside of the traditional archival space to engage in critical conversations with researchers, librarians, data archivists and members of the Aboriginal community about the management of digital research data. I am now a passionate advocate for the linking of dispersed data and see the role of archivists to also be about collaboration and connecting collections for the benefit of communities. The digital domain provides opportunities for archival practices to be reshaped to connect collections through culturally safe practices. To open up archival collections and enable a diversity of perspectives to be connected to records.[8]

My experiences of working with ATSIDA have opened up my professional understandings to think of new approaches to practice. I have spent considerable time reflecting on the potential use of the Boards records to build greater understanding of

Indigenous people in NSW. This could be achieved by designing new approaches, based on appropriate protocols and culturally safe measures, to allow connection to and critique of the collection. The ATSIDA project was proactive in its approach and the team and advisory group worked with researchers and Indigenous communities to discuss data and records management at the conceptual stage of their research. The work of ATSIDA began with an acceptance of the complexities of working with records and communities. It encouraged relationship building through conversation and mutual respect to establish protocols for managing data and research collections.[9] The ATSIDA project promoted ongoing connection to collections by communities so that multiple perspectives could be attached to the records and data that were created in the research process.

Building positive impact of archives for community wellbeing

Transforming methods to build more proactive practice is important to improve community health and wellbeing. Indigenous communities have been heavily impacted by European settlement and it is important that Indigenous people be given an opportunity to heal past trauma. Archivists and information professions can assist this process by reinventing archival practice to allow for ongoing conversation, and by building collaborative projects to allow Indigenous people to be active participants in the management of records. In order to do this, the profession needs to look at building sustainable programs of action. As the recent OCHRE project (2013) suggests:

> Aboriginal wellbeing has social, economic, emotional, cultural and spiritual dimensions and healing needs to occur at the individual, family and community level. Healing is a process that takes time and cannot be achieved through a one-off event or program.[10]

Archival methods need to allow other more diverse ways for archival collections to be examined and for this to happen we need to let go of our control and create new opportunities for collections to be managed.[11] I would encourage the profession to engage in further research and program development to build conversation around diversity, and the different ways that people manage, transmit and care for knowledge and records. Greater awareness should be built around the needs of communities to create practices that recognise that the protocols of one community may be different to those of another, and subsequently to that of the dominant western paradigm promoted in traditional archival practice.

Endnotes

1. The program was a joint initiative of the Australian Society of Archivists and the Australian Library and Information Association that recognised the importance of employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the profession. The cadetships were established at a time when government was discussing the importance of records for Aboriginal identity and wellbeing. See for example Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 'Recommendations', available at <*http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/national/vol5/5. html*>, accessed 24 February 2014, and the National Inquiry Into the Removal of Aboriginal Children From Their Families, 'Bringing Them Home', 1997, available at <*https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-stolen-children-report-1997*>, accessed 24 February 2014.
2. State Records New South Wales, Archives Investigator, 'Board for the Protection of Aborigines', 1883 to 1940, available at <*http://investigator.records.nsw.gov.au/Entity.aspx?Path=%*

5CAgency%5C559>, accessed 24 February 2014, and 'Aborigines Welfare Board', 1940 to 1969, available at *<http://investigator.records.nsw.gov.au/Entity.aspx?Path=\Agency\560>*, accessed 24 February 2014.

3. For discussions around records and surveillance see for example L Russell, 'Indigenous Knowledge and Archives: Accessing Hidden History and Understandings', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2005, pp. 161–71, and F Ross, S McKemmish and S Faulkhead, 'Indigenous Knowledge and the Archives: Designing Trusted Archival Systems for Koorie Communities', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2006, p. 112.

4. D Roberts, 'Imperfect Evidence', Director's letter, in *Vital Signs: In Living Memory – Special Exhibition Issue'*, September 2006, State Records NSW, available at *<http://www. records.nsw.gov.au/documents/vital-signs/issue-09/Vital%20Signs%20Issue%209%20-% 20Directors%20Letter.pdf.>*, accessed 20 February 2014.

5. The NSW government established the Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme (ATFRS) in 2006 to investigate monies held in trust by the government and administered through the Boards. The records of the Boards were being returned to individuals and families, and investigated through the ATFRS Panel and other advocates to recommend repayment of monies held in trust. The challenge for the operation of the ATFRS was the poor record-keeping of the Boards and lack of records that provided evidence of the administration of these accounts. It was an opportune time for archival methods and practices to be adapted to link new context, new perspectives, records and analysis. However time and resource constraints did not allow for this additional work to be carried out, particularly in a time when the focus was on making repayments of monies to individuals and families. For further information on the ATFRS see 'Guidelines for the Administration of the NSW Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme', 2006, available at *<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/ default/files/content/social_justice/international_docs/pdf/atf_guidelines_feb06.pdf>*, accessed 23 February 2014.

6. See Monash University, 'Statement of Principles Relating to Australian Indigenous Knowledge and the Archives' (in particular 'Principle 5: Recognition of Need to Set the Record Straight'), available at *<http://infotech.monash.edu/research/about/centres/cosi/projects/trust/ deliverables/principles-8.html>*, accessed 24 February 2014, and Monash University, 'Exposure Draft Position Statement: Human Rights, Indigenous Communities in Australia and the Archives' (in particular the section on the 'Principle of the Right to Know the Truth and the Right of Reply', available at *<http://infotech.monash.edu/research/about/centres/cosi/projects/ trust/deliverables/human-rights-6.html>*, accessed 24 February 2014.

7. The photographs of the Boards, which are open to public access, are an exception to this. The exhibition 'In Living Memory: An Exhibition of Surviving Photographs from the Records of the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board From 1919 to 1966' sought to index, contextualise and make stories of Aboriginal people available to sit alongside the official images. Further information is available at *<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/ exhibition-romance-industry/past-exhibitions/in-living-memory/in-living-memory-exhibition>*, accessed 24 February 2014.

8. See for example systems being created specifically for the management of Indigenous cultural heritage: Mukurtu, available at *<http://www.mukurtu.org/>*, and the Ara Irititja project, available at *<http://www.irititja.com/>*, accessed 24 February 2014.

9. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Archive, 'ATSIDA Protocols for the Preservation, Access, Reuse and Repatriation of Research Data Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities', available at *<http://www.atsida.edu.au/protocols/atsida>*, accessed 25 February 2014.

10. OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment), NSW Government Plan for Aboriginal Affairs: Education, Employment & Accountability, April 2013, available at *<http://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/AA_OCHRE_final. pdf>*, accessed 24 February 2014.

11. Nakata and Langton (2005) also call for an 'unsettling of established practice' to create dialogue around complexities and to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and concerns are addressed appropriately in the management of Indigenous knowledge. See M Nakata and M Langton, *Australian Indigenous Knowledge and Libraries*, UTSePress, Sydney, 2009, available at *<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/research/bitstream/handle/10453/19486/E-book.pdf? sequence=1>*, accessed 24 February 2014.