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ARTICLE

Mela Mijimit, Dalimbat Mela Stori (We Together, We Telling Our Story)[1]: Exploring a Living Archive of Aboriginal Art and Knowledge – A Work in Progress …

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Abstract

This article explores the Living Archive project as a process of knowledge exhchange within and between two Aboriginal communities, Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land and Maree Clarke (Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta, Boonwurrung) and her family/community from southeast Australia. The article outlines the relationships formed and the work conducted by Aboriginal co-authors, alongside their non-Indigenous collaborators, when researching and revivifying Ancestral information in archives and museums. This processes of working together to reclaim the archives, reveals Indigenous knowledge systems determinately embedded in art-making. The dynamic process of art-making, inclusive of the relationality of Indigenous knowledges, contests linear and static Western archiving, revealing a rich system for archiving the past in the present for future generations. The article also discusses some of the setbacks the project encountered when striving to provide an appropriate and accessible digital database for the communities, so they can determine the most appropriate ways for engaging with their archived material collected throughout the project.

Keywords: *Living archive*; *Collaboration*; *Art-making*; *Culture-making*; *decolonising*

There've been so many projects. Everything of mine that's on the Living Archive, it's all been projects run in my backyard. From making possum skin cloaks, to kangaroo tooth necklaces, to supersized 50-metre river reed necklaces. I've shown my family, my nieces and nephews, how to lay a cloak out and cut it and sew it; we also had students coming around to my home, so they learnt how to sew. During all of these processes, it's about sitting around having conversations, sharing stories, sharing different cultural experiences too. And, you know, mapping designs on the cloak, and painting it, and sharing all of those stories.

One of the best things about the Living Archive is that sharing, that continual knowledge exchange, is ongoing. Having it embedded in creative practice is one of the ways it's revealed

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> *just how alive an archive can be. It's not just putting things in drawers or putting them on shelves. People are doing it still [transmitting knowledge and culture], we're doing it in my backyard.*[2]

These are the words of Maree Clarke (Mutti Mutti / Wamba Wamba / Yorta Yorta / Boonwurrung), senior knowledge holder and artist, and one of the leaders of the Living Archive Project. In this article, collaboratively-authored by a team trying to imagine and build a new, different kind of archive, we argue that **art-making demonstrates the aliveness of the Living Archive**. Art-making is how knowledge is exchanged, both intergenerationally and interculturally. The archive *is* these exchanges of knowledge: the making-together and the telling of and listening to stories, always ongoing. The archive is the action – cutting, sewing, stitching, beading, painting, all the material processes of art-making and the telling of stories – and the relationships of responsibility, reciprocity, and care that grow from that action. Living archives contest and resist what conventional archives are and do.[3]

Introduction

In this article, we focus on the achievements and learning (and some setbacks and critiques) experienced during the Living Archive (LA) of Aboriginal Art and Knowledge project. The work involves situating Indigenous knowledge alongside, and in contrast to, dominant Western models of archives, which have, for too long, sought to control and determine how we know and what we know. Our main argument is that art-making is knowledge exchange, an ongoing, non-linear process of activating stories of the past in the present, and ensuring that knowledge is accessible for future generations. Art-making is 'archiving' from the perspectives and positionalities deeply embedded in community life, kinship relations, and caring for Country.[4]

Working with two distinct communities, the LA project focused on knowledge exchange between First Nations people from different regions of the country known today as Australia. The remote community of Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land (Northern Territory); and Maree Clarke, her family and community in urban/regional southeast Australia (mainly Victoria and NSW), have experienced colonisation differently, yet they share an enduring connection to Country and culture.

As a project that situates Indigenous knowledges as central, interviews, emails, and conference recordings from Aboriginal co-researchers are included to contextualise what a LA may be. The work here contests the structure of the academic paradigm, which values single-authored publications, is inherently hierarchical, patriarchal, and colonising.[5] The word 'archive' is embedded in western knowledge paradigms; its Greek root 'archeion' means a government building, a term synchronous with locking things away (and granting access as a privilege of the elite who knew how to navigate its rules and norms). This 'archive' has been the recorder and the repository of history – the holder of facts.

Over the last 4 years, we (the authors of this paper) have been working to build a LA. Furthering earlier projects and ongoing relationships, we set out to radically reimagine 'the archive' from Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing things.[6] The LA Project currently holds material connected to the two communities mentioned above, consisting of the Ngukurr Collection (NKCL) and the Maree Clarke collection (MACL). The NKCL holds approximately 2,000 items from museums, galleries, and libraries worldwide. The MACL holds over 5,000 items from Maree Clarke's artistic practice, including photographs and artwork, as well as records and metadata held in collections that Maree and her community are connected to, many revitalised by Maree as contemporary artworks.

Reimagining 'the archive' from Indigenous perspectives is urgent social justice activism: conventional archives, libraries, museums, and universities are collecting institutions that are inherently colonial, built on unceded, stolen land, according to logics of ownership, categorisation, linearity, and compartmentalisation. Indigenous archivist Kirsten Thorpe (Worimi) and co-authors argue for a multifaceted strategy of resistance and redress to these structures and systems: (1) create new technologies, platforms, and approaches to archives; (2) hold institutions accountable for past (and present) injustices; (3) ask communities what they want and need; and 4) do the work to make the change.[7] Our LA project takes up that call.

According to Aboriginal academics, archivists and creatives, a '**living archive**' is:

> Aboriginal storytelling, in its many different forms…It recasts and reframes the archives as living, breathing entities to be entered into and into conversation with.[8]

> an Aboriginal community archive containing both tangible and intangible records… [These] may be transmitted orally by members of the community or passed on through art, dance or storytelling – that is, they are not captured in particular physical or digital form but are transmitted through interaction and connections between people.[9]

> Historically, archives have been sources of pain for our communities; when we reclaim them to honour the ongoing legacies of our people, they can be sources of celebration. The [Latje Latje Dance] group [Mildura] lives on in the dances that are lovingly passed down through families, in the memories of group members and in photo albums that contain windows to the past still living present.[10]

> 'The practice of just doing and being' [is]…all about the process … How these things … come together is…more important than the outcome of it, when you're actually physically doing the work of stitching possum skins together. There's a synergy to that kind of work…I think about grounding myself in the process…and recognising that's where the important stuff is really happening …[11]

For colonised peoples, 'the archive' is often connected with pain, trauma, sorrow, and grief. Archives have conventionally been instruments of surveillance and dispossession; they are also metaphors of unequal power relations and control.[12] However, they are being reclaimed, reimagined, and reworked in dynamic, innovative, cultural and kin-affirming ways.

The 'black armband' debate that raged in public discourse in Australia in the early 2000s, commonly known as the 'history wars', was a divisive and destructive attempt at pitting the historical western record against Aboriginal perspectives.[13] The past is not over for Aboriginal people, but is being made and remade. Maree is clear about the power of art to continue to tell these stories. Art-making and resulting 'artworks' allow for the telling of stories as tangible material, asserting Aboriginal voices, which attest to Aboriginal sovereignty, making visible the past in the present. As Maree articulates:

> *… [with art,] you can talk about all of those hard subjects that people don't like to talk about, whatever that might be. It could be genocide. It could be deaths in custody…It's happened all over the place. But through art…it's just a different way you can approach things and make things look beautiful. And then you look at that 50 metre river reed necklace [that I made], and that talks about loss of land, language and cultural practices on this major scale. It's somewhere to start the conversation. And somewhere to put the stories …*[14]

Who we are and where we come from

As a team of co-authors, we have worked together for over 5 years, and some of us have been collaborating for much longer. We are led by senior Indigenous knowledge holders Jeanine Leane (Wiradjuri), Maree Clarke, Kerri Clarke (Boonwurrung), Karen Rogers (Ngalakgan), Daphne Daniels (Nunggubuyu), Robin Rogers (Warndarrang), Owen Turner (Ngandi), and emerging artist Mitch Mahoney (Boonwurrung / Barkandji). We were brought together through Maree's collaborative, intergenerational, and intercultural work as an artist, and also guided by the Ngukurr community and their similar ambitions to reclaim their knowledge in collecting institutions and elsewhere. Non-Indigenous co-authors Fran Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, Richard Chenhall, and Kate Senior have substantial long-term relationships with these communities; and Alannah Croom has been the project archivist.

This article grows out of the Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) annual conference in September 2023, in which Maree Clarke and Fran Edmonds were invited to give the Loris Williams Memorial Lecture because of their work on an Australian Research Council (ARC) project to build a LA. Via the ARC project, substantial relationships formed between two communities from opposite ends of the country (Australia): artist Maree Clarke and her extended family in the south; and the Ngukurr community in the north. Collaborations revealed that interconnections between these communities are long-standing and an example of Indigenous exchanges and knowledge systems across the continent that have been enacted for millennia (see Figure 1). This intervenes in prevalent non-Indigenous assumptions and configurations of Indigeneity according to binary distinctions (north/south, urban/remote, etc)[15]; in contrast, our project has emphasised the ways people engage with their histories, stories, and with each other, across time and place.

In the sections that follow, we discuss several examples of knowledge exchange via art-making: possum-skin cloaks and feather flowers exemplify the endurance of Ancestral memory and the potential in accessing 'the archive' in contemporary creative expressions. Throughout, we are arguing that these dynamic processes of sharing knowledge and making-together keep culture alive, and have always done so. These processes are the LA. Finally,

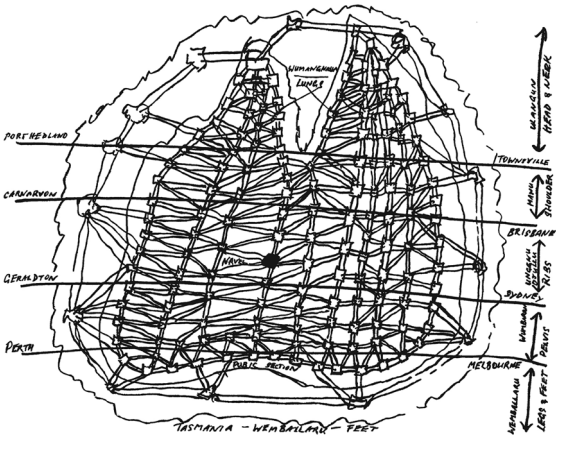

Figure 1. 'Bandiayan: the continent', by David Mowaljarlai (Ngarinyin) first published in Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive by David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Malnic, Magabala Books, Broome,1993, and reproduced courtesy of Magabala Books. This illustration depicts trade routes and storylines linking Indigenous nations, peoples, communities, and language groups all across the continent.

we conclude with a critique of the enduring limitations of institutions and existing infrastructures in supporting this work.

The Living Archive

The Newcastle / Ngukurr cloak

In May–June 2023, a possum skin cloak, originally sewn in Newcastle, New South Wales, was taken to Ngukurr, Northern Territory, to be marked by artists from two distinct regions of the country. This included Maree's eldest niece, Kerri Clarke, Kerri's adult son Mitch Mahoney, and Kerri's husband Wade Mahoney (Barkandji) from southeast Australia (Victoria/New South Wales). Kerri and her family are connected to the tradition of possum skin cloak making, a cultural practice embedded in the southeast. Karen Rogers and her family in Ngukurr hosted the cloak's visit to their Country.

Beginning as a stitched cloak with students at Newcastle High School, the cloak was later marked with designs during the visit to Ngukurr. This process supported the LA project's ambitions to understand knowledge exchange/storytelling and cultural strengthening through art-making. The initial workshop in Newcastle, supported the cloak's cultural integrity, as Aboriginal people from the Hunter Valley region (Awabakal, Wonnarua, and Worimi) have long been associated with the cultural practices surrounding possum skin cloaks. The completion of the cloak's inscribed and painted designs in Ngukurr signalled the continuing collaborations and relationship building within and between the two communities (southeast Australia and Ngukurr) and was a visible sign of art-making as a relational and tangible 'archive' – one that supports Indigenous knowledge systems as ongoing and interconnected.

Possum skin cloak story:Ancestral memory

Among the LA project's major goals was to intervene in institutional frameworks that have determined how and from whom knowledge is transmitted – to vest authority and ownership away from the institution, to recognise Indigenous sovereignty and move towards decolonising the archive.[16] Since colonisation, priority has been given to the hierarchical structures of knowledge as determined by a Western knowledge system, constructed through educational and collecting institutions, i.e., the academy and GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives and museums).

The idea of using a possum skin cloak to support knowledge-exchange as archive-making stems from work driven by the revivification of possum-skin cloak-making by a cohort of southeast Australian Aboriginal matriarchs: Vicki Couzens (Kerrae Wurrong/Gunditjmara), Treanha Hamm (Yorta Yorta) and Lee Darroch (Yorta Yorta). The women reclaimed the practice of cloak-making in 1999 after visiting two extant cloaks in Museums Victoria, the flagship ethnographic museum in Naarm (Melbourne): the Lake Condah cloak (Gunditjmara) and the Maiden's Punt cloak from Echuca (Yorta Yorta).[17] Their intervention in museums, to bring cloak making skills to life, grew from the early 2000s. Maree Clarke joined the women at this time; her research into her Ancestral collections in museums was a significant contribution to realising the group's intentions to return cloak-making and associated design work to communities across the southeast.

Together, the women formed an organisation called Banmirra Arts to revive cloak-making in communities, and with funding from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, were able to reconnect people with their culture and identity, while promoting wellbeing.[18] The return of cloak-making to communities is one of the most determined responses to the colonial archives, speaking back to collecting institutions and lingering

ideas about southeast Australian Aboriginal cultural knowledge and associated practices as having 'died out'.

Maree remembers:

> *[In] the late '80s, I went into the Melbourne Museum when they started digitising the collection … I was able to flip through all of these different objects. Able to print off southeast Australian objects. And when we were doing the possum-skin cloak-making workshops back in community for the Commonwealth Games in 2006,*[19]*… we were able to give back to community designs from their own traditional area … And people were saying, '**My art makes sense to me now'. Because they were already Ancestral memory-like,** doing those similar designs in their artworks.*[20]

The revitalisation of cloak-making is an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, facilitating the uptake of cultural knowledge through creative practice, including the significance of storytelling and mark-making on cloaks. These designate peoples' connections to and knowledge of Country and kin.[21]

Making cloaks: decolonising institutions

The significance of creating the cloak

The possum-skin cloak workshop at Newcastle High School was the second iteration of cloak-making initiated by the LA project. The first occurred at a prestigious tertiary institution, Mount Holyoke College, in Massachusetts, USA, where partner investigator Sabra Thorner is based, and was a significant precursor to the Newcastle / Ngukurr cloak project. Via an upper-level seminar and artists' residency, this was where and how the possibilities of learning via making-together began. We were guided by decolonising methodologies,[22] wanting to centre Indigenous knowledges and modalities for knowledge-transmission in the classroom and in the curriculum; as well as in the museum (curating and collections management alike).

The cloak-making at Mount Holyoke was facilitated by Sabra and led by Maree, Kerri, Mitch, and Mitch's sister Molly Mahoney (Boonwurrung / Barkindji). The artists in residence worked with a cohort of undergraduate students to create the first possum-skin cloak made on U.S. soil. The goal was to inspire students' learning via Indigenous methods of knowledge transmission: while reading texts and writing research papers are conventional modes of academic learning, students were invited into watching and making as different yet epistemically equivalent methodologies. Students were encouraged to learn as well as to *un*learn,[23] to work together and to reflect on their learning in order to reinforce that learning. Students were included in storytelling about Country and led through exploration of their own ways of relating to place.[24]

The Mount Holyoke cloak depicts the Seven Sisters Dreaming, an Indigenous creation story that also resonates across many cultures (Figure 2). Mount Holyoke is one of the original Seven Sisters Colleges in the U.S., a collective of women's colleges named after the Pleiades, as the constellation is known in Greek mythology and Western astronomy. Mount Holyoke College is also located near a small mountain range known locally as the Seven Sisters. It is a multivalent metaphor with meaning across place, culture, science, and cosmology.

After the conclusion of the seminar and artists' residency, the Seven Sisters Cloak was acquired by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum and featured in an exhibition called 'Considering Indigeneity' (August 2022–May 2023). While on display, it was used across multiple subject areas, for example, in Education, Social Justice, Creative Writing, Environmental Studies, Biology, and Psychology,[25] and is slated for inclusion in a newly redeveloped

Figure 2. *Seven Sisters Cloak* (2022), Mount Holyoke College; note the seven circles at the top of the cloak. Photo Fran Edmonds.

permanent exhibition in 2026. The cloak has already revealed potential for interdisciplinary conversations across the Humanities/Social Sciences and Science/Technology, and is a model for learning-together beyond its collaborative making.

While it remains in an institutional collection, the presence of the cloak in a place of learning intervenes in a structure that has historically determined what is knowledge and how it is engaged with. Thus, it was essential that the Seven Sisters Cloak remain in the place where it was made and on the Country that inspired its designs and stories, and where its message can continue to be shared with diverse audiences, including students (and their parents), faculty, alumnae, and the visiting public. Kerri explains:

> *We [my family] discussed what would happen with the [Seven Sisters] cloak and we strongly believed that it belonged in the Country that it was made on … [and] made of, to be left for the people, as a memory of the time that we were there.* ***So the making is the story****. But also for me, I really feel now that we're not there, that it's a real stand that we made. We took a bit of a risk. We had many stories within that cloak. We followed protocol…I think it's a bit of a statement, a bit of a learning piece…[W]hen we were over there [in the USA], people didn't even know really who we were, or why we were there…Yeah, I think [the cloak] belonged on that Country, like the stories of the Seven Sisters…I [wanted] to leave it there, because some of the [First Nations] people that we partnered with… they offered their Country and their story as well…*[26]

The Mount Holyoke cloak, completed prior to the Newcastle / Ngukurr cloak, challenged the idea of archives as things held elsewhere from their origins.[27] The cloak also provided pathways for understanding how Indigenous ways of knowing and doing are equal to, yet different from, Western methods of teaching and learning.[28] Storytelling that emerged while collaborating on stitching together the possum pelts and design-work for the cloak determined pathways for students to learn about cultural protocols connected with cloak-making. They were encouraged to recognise relationality and reciprocity, Indigenous sovereignty, and the resilience of First Nations peoples and knowledge – in spite of the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Indigenous peoples worldwide.

Newcastle, NSW (Southeast Australia)

Artist Kerri Clarke lives in the Hunter Valley, where the city of Newcastle is located. She learned cloak-making from her aunt and other matriarchs, and has become a prominent possum-skin cloak-maker herself, regularly asked to conduct community-based workshops on cloak-making. Kerri reflects on the impact of the revival of possum-skin cloak-making to her current practice as a cloak-maker, including carrying the tradition on with her now adult children, Mitch and Molly, and extending this to sharing that knowledge with others:

> *[W]hat inspired me to become a possum skin cloak maker was really when our family joined the possum skin storyline around 2006. My aunty Maree Clarke was engaged as a key collaborator on that project to help create the cloaks for the Commonwealth Games. From that moment…myself and my children started to participate with the matriarchs in the making of cloaks, particularly in the workshops that were around, taking the practice back to the communities where the cloaks that are held in institutions were kept. We were living on…Wonnarua Country (and still are) when they [Maree and the other matriarchs] came to do some work around the Hunter River cloak…I was fortunate enough to be here and to be able to participate in that knowledge sharing, [and to] be taught…*[29]

The Hunter River cloak Kerri is referring to was collected from the Hunter Valley region c1840, and is currently held in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC (U.S.A.). It is the oldest and most complete extant possum-skin cloak in the world,[30] and was a motivation for taking the possum skin cloak story to a cohort of mainly Aboriginal students (from years 9–12) enrolled in Big Picture Education at the Cooks Hill campus of Newcastle High School. Big Picture offers students opportunities to learn through project-based learning and tailors programs to student interests.[31] The program supported the hands-on learning that possum-skin cloak-making requires and responded to the collaborative, community-based workshop approach that Kerri has also nurtured with her children since they began cloak-making.

> *[S]ome of the students [at Big Picture] had heard about the Hunter River cloak…I felt being able to transfer that knowledge…to young people whose Ancestors could have potentially been making or been around the Hunter River cloak…and who potentially descend from that cloak, was a real privilege. It shows that connection there as well. And to other kids who come from the southeast [but not from the Hunter Valley region] and were able to have that knowledge transferred to them as well…Some that weren't from the southeast but were able to understand [and to learn] that, whilst they're participating [in the cloak story], the cultural practice is really based through a birthright to be able to recreate these [cloaks]… Sharing the cultural protocols with them [was great], they were really responsive to that.*[32]

Ngukurr in Newcastle

Over a period of 10 weeks in mid-2022, students worked with 36 possum-skin pelts, learning the techniques of sewing them together to create a cloak under the guidance of Kerri and her family (Figure 3). Ngukurr artist Karen Rogers (Ngalakan) also visited Newcastle and shared stories of her Country as part of the knowledge exchange that was emerging in the project.

Alongside cloak-making, students were introduced to contemporary stories, including the story of Karen's Ancestor, Dexter Daniels. Dexter (Numamuridi) was an activist and advocate for Aboriginal equality and social justice in the 1960s–1970s. He was a prominent figure in the Wave Hill Walk Off,[33] renowned for driving between communities in the Northern Territory in an old Bedford truck to garner support for equal pay and land rights for Aboriginal people (Figures 4–5). His campaigning extended to visits down south, where he attracted further support from the trade union movement.[34]

Figure 3. Kerri Clarke (front) with finished sewn cloak, discusses cloak making with Big Picture students, Newcastle High School 2022. Prof. Kate Senior in red (foreground). Facing camera, from right students include Liz, Chayse, Sheri Bird (Learning and support teacher), Melitta. Photo Fran Edmonds.

Figure 4. Tyre puncture, Dexter Daniels with Richard Preece (under vehicle). Near Wattie Creek 1975. Photo courtesy Meredith Burgmann.

Dexter visited Newcastle, a mining and heavy industry centre from the late 19th century, which led to its significance in the mobilisation of organised labour and collective bargaining in Australia. Stories of Dexter's visits emerged through research conducted by Kate Senior, a collaborator on our LA team. At the Copley Archives, University of

Figure 5. Karen Rogers 2022, Water colour painting of Figure 4.

Newcastle, a box containing newspaper clippings about Dexter had lain dormant for at least three decades.[35] While many of the articles are available in collecting institutions elsewhere, the box in Newcastle connects Dexter's story and his trade union work to that of his great niece Daphne Daniels (Nunggabuyu), a co-researcher on the LA project. Daphne is a recent recipient of an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Newcastle for her work as long-time editor of the *Ngukurr Nyus* and advocate for self-determination in Ngukurr.[36]

Dexter also travelled to Melbourne, where Maree Clarke now lives, during a time that coincided with campaigns for the handing back of Lake Tyers Aboriginal reserve in Gippsland, Victoria (Gunai/Kurnai Country).[37] A 1967 news-reel clip shows Dexter alongside the Yorta Yorta activist and renowned Aboriginal equal rights advocate (Pastor) Sir Doug Nicholls, protesting with university students, trade unionists and church groups, for Aboriginal land rights and self-determination.[38] Dexter's trips south cemented relationships and consolidated connections and exchanges between the north and south, while emphasising Aboriginal peoples' fight for their Country.[39]

Dexter is remembered as an important figure in Ngukurr, and the discovery of materials about him in the University of Newcastle archive make tangible how knowledge is held in collecting institutions far away from the communities holding responsibility for that knowledge. What has also become clear to us through the LA Project is the urgent need for intercultural collaboration in keeping these vectors of connection alive. This is both activist and creative work seeking to heal the enduring harms of colonial endeavours to alienate people and their things from Country. This is further borne out in the story we turn to next, about feather flowers and the activation and extension of Ancestral memory.

Feather flowers

In April 2021, Karen and Daphne visited Naarm (Melbourne) as part of the LA project, to explore Ngukurr collections held in Museums Victoria and the Koorie Heritage Trust (a keeping place for material culture from Australia's southeast). The women also spent an afternoon in Maree's backyard to share and exchange stories about art-making, cultural collections, and their synchronous efforts to revitalise the knowledge and memories of their Ancestors via research into archives.

Maree's backyard, in an inner west suburb of Melbourne, is her home art studio, a making space and an Aboriginal community gathering place. As we've argued elsewhere,[40] it is both sovereign land and a site where Maree invites others into her practice, engaging in intercultural and intergenerational knowledge exchange. It's where she feels most comfortable – where her family is; where she holds all her tools, supplies, and materials; where she's in control – and where she is most at ease experimenting, creating, and innovating.

Donna Blackall (Yorta Yorta), master weaver, also joined them in the backyard (Figure 6). The visit was serendipitous: earlier that day, the Ngukurr visitors had seen Donna's collaborative work with Maree's great-nephew Mitch 'Weaving Sustainable Culture' (2021) at Footscray Community Arts, located on the banks of the Maribyrnong River. This outdoor exhibition featured a series of river-reed canoes with woven fishing nets incorporated into their design[41]; the project set out to promote the sustainability of plants and harvesting practices, and highlight the river's biodiversity. Making tangible knowledge of Country – the artists know what to collect, where from, and in which season(s) – these works restored Indigenous stories to the site.

Figure 6. Maree's backyard April 2021. From left: Donna Blackall, Daphne Daniels with the feather flower she made, Karen Rogers and Maree Clarke. Photo Fran Edmonds.

While at the museum, Karen and Daphne viewed feather flowers from Ngukurr, delicate objects consisting of small feathers, in various colours, attached to a wire frame with crepe paper wound around the wire and glued.[42] The Ngukurr flowers are strikingly similar to those made by Aboriginal women in southeast Australia (from the 1920s onwards),[43] where they were created as home decorations for sale to tourists or through missions. Although they could be interpreted as adopting Western aesthetics, the feather flowers in fact facilitated knowledge exchange in relation to both the ceremonial and functional purposes of feathers. As they came to adorn white middle class homes, they also alerted consumers to the continuing existence of Aboriginal people.[44]

In southeast Arnhem Land, feathers were – and continue to be – used in mortuary practices and as body ornamentation, included in necklaces, armbands, headdresses, belts, and aprons. There are many ceremonial feather items from the region in the museum collections, many collected by anthropologist Walter Baldwin Spencer (c.1911), and with little or no information about makers or making-processes. During their visit to the museum, Karen and Daphne identified items for digital redistribution back to Ngukurr, including both ceremonial objects and feather flowers.

Karen's uncle, Walter Rogers (Warndarrang), a senior law man in Ngukurr, is a deft creator of ceremonial objects which include feathers.[45] Feathers are also functional, for instance, as additional fibre to give twine a fluffy texture.[46] Many birds were and are important food sources; the supply of feathers has long been a reliable by-product of subsistence.[47] The Ngukurr feather flowers held in the Melbourne museum include elements that suggest they emerged from traditional designs, adapted as the community faced devastating loss due to colonial forces; they are evidence of makers' ingenuity and cultural resilience (Figure 7).[48] In other words, Indigenous knowledge is dynamic, and transformations in design and the use of material culture have

Figure 7. Feather flowers. Museum Melbourne, 2021. Photo Fran Edmonds.

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always occurred. While feather-flower making is relatively recent, the practice of using flowers for ceremonial, decorative, and functional purposes extends back in time and continues today.

How the art of feather flower-making arrived in Ngukurr is part of our ongoing research. Our working theory is that the practice emerged there in the 1930s, when feather flowers were made predominantly by women who sold them through the Roper River Mission 'handicrafts' enterprise via a shop in Sydney (Figures 8a–8b).[49]

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) had been established by the Anglican Church in 1908, in an attempt to mitigate the devastating effects of the rapid onslaught of pastoralism in the region[50]; as a result, up to nine clan groups were brought together.[51] Given the overwhelming impact of colonisation and the mission influence, many cultural practices, including traditional languages and knowledge of cultural objects, are today endangered, with people seeking to revivify this knowledge through art-making and other forms of storytelling.

Missionaries imposed Christianity and a work ethic that also relied on commercial enterprises to support their endeavours. The making of the feather flowers by women was both practical, for the purposes of money making, but also interventionist, adapting yet maintaining cultural practices, which simultaneously resisted aspects of the colonial economy.

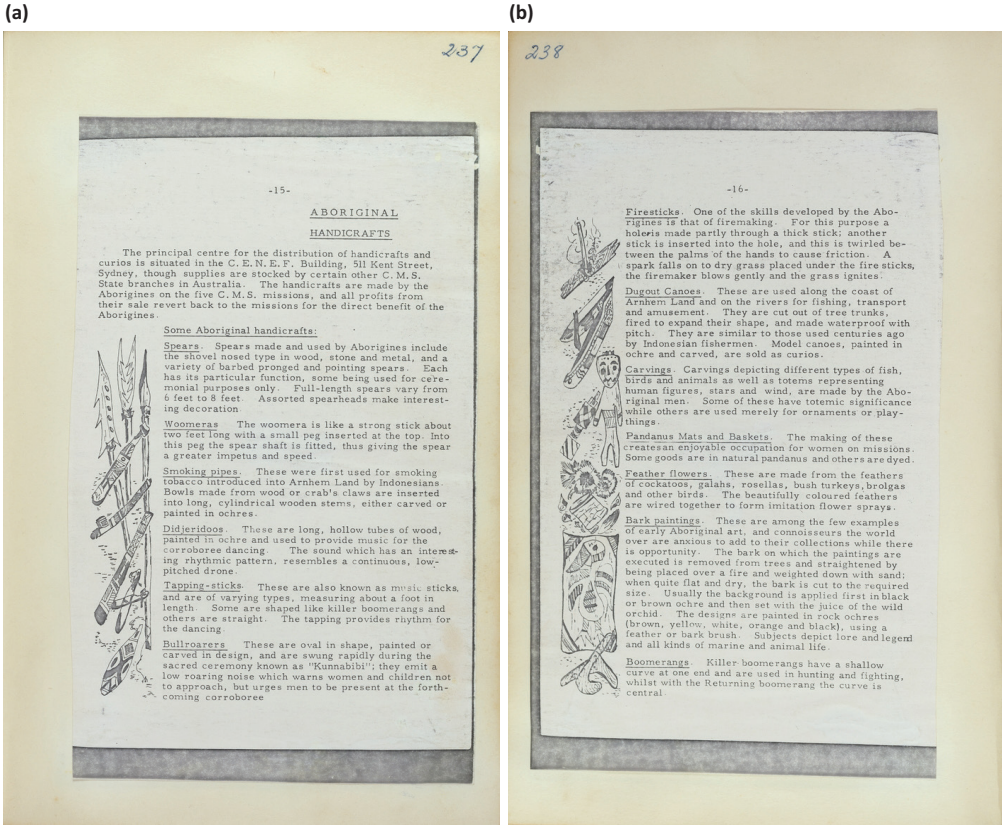

Figure 8 (a and b). Northern Territory Archives, Church Missionary Society Northern Territory Record Series (NTRS) 870, General Records of the Roper River (Ngukurr) Community Box 2, pp. 237–238. Copy of pages from Church Missionary Society (CMS) Field Facts, 1963, 'Aboriginal Handicrafts', pp. 15–16; Pages are pasted into the 'Roper All About, Volume 3', feather flowers are described halfway down the second page. Reproduced here with permission from the Church Missionary Society, Australia.

This agentive, activist work negotiating Christian, colonial, and capitalist values was driven by women's knowledge.

In Maree's backyard in April 2021, amidst boxes of feathers and reeds, ochres and resins and so many other materials, the artists and knowledge-holders from northern and southern Australia began art-making and storytelling together. Under a blue tarp and heat lamps against the Naarm autumn chill, Daphne selected white cockatoo feathers, attached them to wire, secured them tightly with twine, and held up the result happily, for others to see. Maree, not missing a beat, responded by saying, 'well, that's Ancestral memory!'[52]

The concept of 'Ancestral memory' – that cultural knowledge is lying dormant and has not been extinguished by colonial violence and dispossession but, in fact, endures, awaiting awakening – was reactivated and shared by the two artist/knowledge holders (Daphne and Maree) coming together in an Indigenous space (Maree's backyard). The exchange that occurred between all the artists in the backyard that day – Karen, Daphne, Maree, Donna – via making and storytelling together, is a significant intervention into collecting institutions' control over both physical objects and the knowledge they hold. Earlier, Daphne had said that she was looking forward to learning how to make the flowers so that she could take the process back to young people in Ngukurr as one way to revive and share cultural knowledge for a new generation, to continue the stories into the future. This story exemplifies one moment of intercultural and intercommunity exchange – sharing, learning, and making, together, in ways that are embodied. These processes transcend conventional yet restrictive notions about bounded-off places and communities, cultural knowledges, external influences and past/present/future. Instead, the coming-together in the backyard offers a glimpse into ongoing trajectories of interconnection.

In a January 2024 interview, Karen reflected on her April 2021 visit to Naarm and what's happened since then in Ngukurr:

> *After Walter [Karen's uncle, mentioned above] saw the pictures of the feather flowers, he was so interested in doing them, and started making them. I think he sold one. But Walter, he's old, you need younger people…I would love to see more people making what our Ancestors used to make, maybe getting young people to do some of that stuff. I reckon those feather flowers could be famous…*
>
> *Walter makes the bulbul [ceremonial adornment][53]…He's got a class this year with the school children… He could take them out to collect the feathers, show them where to get them, that kind of thing…Some of them had knowledge already when Robin [Rogers, Walter's brother] used to work there [at the school], caring for Country. So maybe that can continue with Walter…*
>
> *In this learning, you can't just go kill a bird for a feather. You gotta find a dead one to do that thing, like what Maree does [with roadkill].[54] You have to know how to put them together, and you have to tell a story about those feathers too…*
>
> *When I first went [to the Museum], seen those things, I cried actually. I had tears in my eyes. Seeing all my Ancestors'…stuff made me feel [sad]…They did all this stuff and here it is in the museum. Couldn't believe it. These things are very important, and maybe one of the Ancestors actually did some of them…It makes people, even next generation, realise what we were doing, what our Ancestors were doing, a long time ago. They use to make things…All that stuff, they made them for a reason. It could be for ceremony.[55]*

Karen highlights the importance of visiting museum collections and viewing Ancestral objects to contemporary art practices, and the role of contemporary art practices both in teaching the next generation(s) of children and in making Ngukurr known to wider audiences. The significance of art practices is not just in *making*, that is, assembling materials into aesthetically pleasing objects (that could be appreciated by others, exhibited in museums/galleries, and bought/sold on a market). Rather, art-making is embedded in a holistic knowledge of Country; in the case of the feather flowers, what birds/feathers are necessary, where to get them, when, and how. Transmitting this knowledge is caring for Country.

Karen's story above draws out connections between her own art-making and Maree's. The cross-cultural exchange in the backyard was impactful. It also powerfully destabilises enduring configurations of indigeneity that bifurcate north and south, remote- and urban-living people and ways of knowing, being, and doing. Exchanges have always occurred and have been rendered tangible in practices and in material objects.

Visiting with objects in the museum is emotional work, as people relate to the things made by their Ancestors. This is a stark reminder of the violence of colonialism, the removal of objects, the suppression of language and cultural practice, and the absence of consent to the way Indigenous knowledge has been circulated. Karen's words linguistically emphasise the continuity between herself and Ancestors – 'what we were doing, what our Ancestors were doing, a long time ago'. The kinship is unbroken, and this is expressed via visiting with objects held in collections, and via new aesthetic productions as well. As was evident in feather flower making in Maree's backyard, knowledge is not lost or dead but waiting to be reactivated.[56]

When members of our LA research team visited Ngukurr in May–June 2023, someone had hunted a magpie goose and plucked it in front of the arts centre. On the visitors' last day, feathers were soaking on the veranda in a big bin. Walter was prepping – cleaning and softening – them for new projects: making bulbuls, and/or to take to the school to teach the kids. Robin also showed off bunches of emu feathers he had bound with kangaroo sinew in the way Mitch had instructed him earlier in the visit (Figures 9a–9b).[57] In evidence: both intergenerational knowledge transmission, inspired by the time with museum objects; and ongoing intercultural exchange between artists and knowledge-makers from different geographical, cultural, and language contexts. There was also a palpable sense of the circularity of sharing – from Daphne visiting, storytelling, and art-making in Maree's backyard in Naarm;

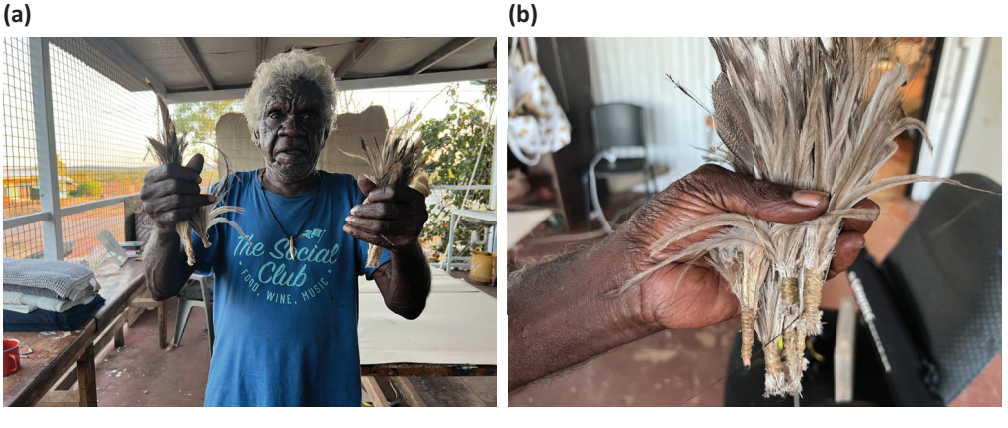

Figure 9 (a and b). Robin Rogers holding emu feathers freshly bound with kangaroo sinew, Ngukurr Arts Centre verandah, June 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

to Walter and Robin later integrating what they'd learned from Naarm visitors into their own art-making at home in Ngukurr.

Ngukurr men at Melbourne Museum

Following on from the women's visit in April 2021, Robin, together with his nephew Owen Turner (Ngandi), came to Naarm in November 2023 to visit with men's materials in the museum, and to instruct on what and how they needed to be cared for.

As is evident in the feather flowers story above, objects from Ngukurr held in museum collections often have an unclear past. Elder Walter Rogers remembers people making the flowers when he was young, but why they were doing so and how they ended up in the museum is not always known. There may be an old tag with tiny writing identifying the year it was collected and the person who collected it. Or there are notes added by previous visitors to the museum collections store (Figure 10).

This information is not always correct. As Owen and Robin were presented with various items in the museum, some had text-based information attached, and some bore markings or design clearly belonging to a specific moiety. Robin would explain that this item belonged to Budal and so only Owen could handle and talk about the item. Other times, Owen and Robin looked at an object and discussed what it was and who it belonged to. Looking at one object, Robin declared 'that's not for us that one, it belong to… [a different] mob, they must speak for that one'.

Robin was adamant that the process for viewing the collections adhere to cultural protocols, insisting on the importance of having Owen and himself as representatives of the two moieties from Ngukurr and their respective clans. Robin explains:

Figure 10. Owen Turner (left) and Robin Rogers inspect feather flowers and string bags from Roper River in Melbourne Museum, November 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

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[L]ike when me and Owen went down [to Melbourne], and Karen and Daphne. But me and Owen, he was Budal [Kangaroo totem, Yirritja moiety] and I was Mambali [Catfish totem, Dhuwa Moiety] …

[Y]ou've gotta take one group from there, one group from there [the two different moieties]. Both men and women. Because if me Mambali, I'm not allowed to talk about Murungun [King Brown Snake]. They've got their own songs, their own writings, painting, everything. You've gotta get…Guyal [Goanna] and Budal, Mambali and Murungun.[58]

[There are] four [semi] moiety groups. You've gotta get each people…four people [from] that moiety group to look at future paintings [collections]…you gotta ask, you gotta have permission…ask them, did you see ceremony? All that thing you've gotta ask them all the time. Like any people that go and see that…Did they see ceremony? They didn't see ceremony, don't take them. They won't know anything about that. That's the real special one. It's the strongest one. Because if they look at that thing…or something and then get killed … Lucky me and Owen was there, you see?[59]

Owen and Robin also identified sacred objects that should not be viewed by either men or women, but instead should be removed and placed in a special collection. Other objects were identified as potentially dangerous and should not be overly handled or investigated. Richard Chenhall (co-author and project researcher) accompanied Robin and Owen as they viewed objects that were attached to men's ceremonies in a special reserved collection area. They were interested in the techniques of how the objects were made and the ceremony they are used in, discussing when the ceremony was last conducted. Having been collected over 100 years ago, the materials and construction methods were different to the present day, as the men explained. When Richard asked whether they wanted to take a photo of the framing of a particular headdress, which was different to present day construction techniques, Owen and Robin said that these items are too ritually powerful and should not be photographed or viewed by people other than members from the specific moiety group.

The men had questions about how these items were collected. For a group of objects that are usually destroyed at the conclusion of ceremony, they asked who gave permission for their removal and how were they taken. Some objects that are not destroyed at the conclusion of ceremonies were viewed as holding Ancestral memories and important ritual power and so why would their forefathers give up these objects?

For Robin and Owen, engaging with Ngukurr collections in Museums Victoria (MV) emphasised the imperative for access in culturally appropriate ways. Karen, when reflecting on Ngukurr collections at the museum, mused about whether it would be good if objects were physically returned, and getting the next generations involved, said:

…it would be interesting for our children to see them. I've seen them, but just me, Owen, Daphne, and Robin have seen 'em…You can see a photo, but it's good to see the real thing. To hold it, yeah. And you know, it might get these young people to say, 'oh, I should do this too'…'try and make this stuff'. Because…you gotta work. So maybe that'd be a little working money for them to survive in this world.

I'm really happy that Robin and Owen got involved with this. Because Robin's the Elder, but… when Robin's not around, Owen will take over then. I reckon getting more younger people involved in it too, as well. So they can understand: we don't travel just for fun when we go down there…It would be a nice experience for the younger people to have a look…[60]

It's not enough that only two women and two men from the community have seen the Ngukurr objects held so far away, in a museum in Naarm; people need access to and control over their cultural items. This is crucial to transmitting knowledge, and to inspiring new art-making based on old stories. Moreover, this is work, not just fun, encoded in Karen's words is a hope that younger generations will accept, bear, and share the responsibilities of cultural transmission. There's a savvy to market commodification, too, urging kids to see the value in money as a pathway to autonomy, and using culture for what you want to use it for.

Mela Mijimit, Dalimbat Mela Stori (We together, we telling our story): the cloak in Ngukurr

As noted above, when Dexter Daniels visited Melbourne to support land rights campaigns in Victoria, he met Sir Douglas Nicholls. Two of Pastor Doug's relatives, his daughter-in-law, Letty Nicholls (Ngarrindjeri) and granddaughter Glenda Nicholls (Waddi Waddi / Ngarrindjeri / Yorta Yorta), are well-known feather flower makers; their work exhibited widely, with extensive collections held by the Koorie Heritage Trust.[61] The connections between Dexter's campaigns for land rights and the feather flowers reveal the relationships and exchanges between people, their endeavours to care for Country, and the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal lifeways. Campaigning to have Country returned and simultaneously re-crafting ceremonial objects for consumption were interventions in the white economy, insisting on Indigenous connections to Country.[62]

While the feather flower story is revitalising knowledge of why and how these items were made in Ngukurr, the circulation of feather flowers in the capitalist economy situates Aboriginal women's work as directly related to knowledge of Country and of keeping that knowledge alive, similar to the campaigns for land rights that were occurring throughout Dexter's and Doug Nicholls' time. While adaptations and changes to cultural practices have been essential to Indigenous survival, these changes are also indicative of the role that reclaiming knowledge from Western 'archives' (including museum collections) has in supporting Indigenous self-determination.

The Newcastle-Ngukurr possum skin cloak is a contemporary example of reclaiming knowledge from a colonial institution and mobilising a specific cultural form in innovative and future-oriented ways. The cloak itself is a LA, in which Ancestral memory is made tangible via its making and marking. The cloak is also a vehicle for sharing those memories and exchanging ideas with Indigenous artists/knowledge-holders from another Country who are similarly committed to keeping knowledge alive through next generations.

In May–June 2023, artists Kerri Clarke, Mitch Mahoney, and Wade Mahoney, along with researcher Fran Edmonds, took the unmarked Newcastle cloak to Ngukurr. Here, they worked with artists and community members to design and mark the cloak with stories relevant to each community (southeast Australia and Ngukurr). Their trip also commenced the return of the digital collections (NKCL) back to community.

The stories eventually marked on the cloak wove together the relationships that were established and the knowledge that was shared throughout the LA project. There was no one story but many, including: bush tucker, waterways and ecological knowledge, revived practices such as making kangaroo teeth necklaces in the southeast, alongside the importance of kinship systems. Their inclusion on the cloak was determined by cultural protocols, specific to the artists and their respective communities. Stories from Ngukurr were marked on the top half of the cloak, while stories from the south were on the bottom – both halves separated by a river (Figure 11).[63] Kerri explains:

Figure 11. Kerri Clarke, Mitch Mahoney, Karen Rogers hold completed Newcastle/Ngukurr cloak (note troopy painting by Karen behind Mitch), Ngukurr Arts Centre, June 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

> *How we determined the designs, honestly, was a back and forwards flip. We didn't ever go in and go, 'oh, it's going to be the story of Dexter, or it's going to be this or it's going to be that'. [M]ost of our cloaks, and this is probably a bit of the practice in that designing phase, where Mitch is sharing, we're all there, but Mitch predominantly, because he's our design guy. We're sharing what we'd normally do. So we'd say, well, we usually put a river, lots of cloaks have rivers. Let's share river story. And then I think we just [went] back and forwards in talking about what are your animals, and what are our animals, and how do you talk about them? So obviously we've got Bunjil [eagle] and Waa [crow] on there [southeast totems, represented as feathers on the cloak]. Ngukurr have their 4 semi-moieties across the top [Budal-Kangaroo; Mambali-Catfish; Murrungun-King Brown Snake and Guyal-Goanna]. And it just kind of fitted… just going, what's important to you and what's important to us?*[64]

Alongside the cloak design, during this fieldwork trip, the Ngukurr Collection (NKCL) digital archive was made available on a hard drive (Figure 12). Fran showed it to Elders, initially at the arts centre (to Walter Rogers and his brothers, one a respected Elder, recently deceased [2024] and Robin, alongside Karen), then later to a select group of Elders representative of the different moieties and language-groups in Ngukurr. The return of the digital archive in this first instance began a conversation, raising awareness among the community about the extent of material in the collection.

Cloak-making as a southeast Australian cultural practice

As a practice reclaimed from the archive, the importance of revivifying possum-skin cloak-making, as an assertion of southeast Australian Aboriginal people's ongoing cultural knowledge, contests over 200 years of colonisation in the region. For instance, Kerri recognises the difficulty of dealing with this history, and the significance of telling stories through art-making to keeping her culture strong:

Figure 12. Walter and Karen Rogers review the NKCL digital archive on external hard drive on the Ngukurr Arts Centre verandah, May 2023.

It's harder, but it's also easier [to work overseas]. It was hard in [a] sense to leave a cloak, and to do the practice [at Mount Holyoke, in the U.S.A.]…Working in an overseas institution, I felt really confident that [possum-skin cloak-making] couldn't be confused [with] whose [cultural] practice it belonged to. We have collaborated internationally with Indigenous communities, but here on home soil, never on Country with another group of Aboriginal people [outside the southeast].[65] *[I]n Australia…the lack of knowledge that [non-Aboriginal] people have and continue to choose to have [about our history], they can run and misinform really quickly. And I think that's damaging to possum skin's story… [S]o-called Australia can get really confused about what's what and value us [as Aboriginal people] in different ways, they compare who's got more culture… from the north to the south.*[66] *And I really think that actually this [Newcastle/Ngukurr] cloak can bust some of those myths … [W]e do have culture down here, and it's living and it's thriving and surviving, …*[67]

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For Kerri and her family, it was essential that the possum-skin cloak-making began in Newcastle, where the tradition belongs. Following the traditional cleansing of the possum pelts by smoking them and obtaining permission from Hunter Valley Elders, the stitched cloak was taken to Ngukurr for marking.

> *I think what enabled me … to take that cloak [to Ngukurr] was…that the cloak was created by young people from the southeast … [We talked about] what [they] would like to say on the cloak… [We also talked to] Elders from that local [Newcastle] area [asking], 'are you comfortable for the cloak to go [to Ngukurr]?' Which they were…[W]hat really got me across the line was meeting the people from Ngukurr, meeting Karen, Daphne and Robin… face to face. [W]e did share possum skin story and how they were made … [W]e followed protocol. I'd heard about the work that Aunty Maree had done with Ngukurr. They'd been strongly culturally vouched for around [cultural] resurgence…*[68]

Relationships and knowledge exchange

Kerri has said 'I wouldn't think that what we did with the Ngukurr community as being a workshop. I see that as knowledge and story exchange'.[69]

Protocols for ensuring the cultural integrity of cloak-making as a southeast Australian cultural practice were a priority for the artists. This included ensuring stories marked on the cloak had the appropriate cultural permissions. According to Ngukurr cultural protocols, Walter Rogers, an Elder (and also the oldest person in the community at 81), was consulted about the stories to be marked on the cloak. These included representations of the four Ngukurr semi-moieties, feathers, bush foods, the river, and the exchange of knowledge between the north and south as represented through the Toyota Troop Carriers (aka 'troopys'), which were symbolic of Dexter's trips around the country.[70] Daphne, as a descendant of Dexter and culturally responsible for his story as it emerges from the archives, was also consulted by Karen.

For Kerri, understanding the complexity of these relationships between the practice of possum skin cloak-making from the southeast, alongside her family and the Ngukurr community's stories as revealed in the cloak, form part of an ongoing discussion about its long-term use and protection.

> *One thing that stood out to me was the level of collaboration and seeking of approval from Elders that was rightfully required in Ngukurr in relation to the cloak design. We have participated in and are continually negotiating, reinforcing, and developing similar processes in our own communities [in the southeast] in relation to cloak-making and storytelling. In Ngukurr, the correct representatives from both of our communities agreed on the final design, including Walter Rogers, Karen Rogers, and Daphne Daniels. This consultative and collaborative process created an amazing result. Whilst we agreed on the design, further discussions must occur with both the Ngukurr community and the Boon Wurrung and Barkindji peoples to come to a clear agreement between the two communities around story, use of language, and the keeping of the cloak…[I]t is vital that we get it right.*[71]

Sharing stories

Karen loves painting 'troopys', which are iconic of Northern Territory communities. They are indispensable for going hunting, visiting family, attending ceremonies (particularly for sorry business), maintaining connections to Country and kin.[72] Kerri came to understand that work to hold on to their Country is both present in people's living memories and ongoing in the

Figure 13. Walter Rogers and Kerri Clarke discussing designs on cloak; Walter is wearing his NLC shirt. Ngukurr Arts Centre, screen print room, June 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

present day. While the artists were finalising Dexter's story on the cloak, Walter Rogers visited the arts centre wearing his Northern Land Council (NLC) shirt. The NLC was formed in 1973 to assist people with their claims to land rights, and Walter is among the longest serving NLC board members (Figure 13). Kerri recounts:

> *When Walter came [into the arts centre] wearing his Northern Land Council shirt… I'd been at uni reading about all that stuff,*[73] *and here he is walking in and instantly I recognise, you would have been there with Dexter. So you know, [Walter] was there in that time, and that seems to me so long ago.*[74]

Storytelling is an expression of knowledge exchange.[75] The processes for considering what to share, and who to share it with have become integral parts of the cloak-making story. This is also archive-making, Indigenous expressions of sovereignty via transmitting knowledge in self-determined ways. Kerri and her family are responsible for maintaining the cultural integrity of possum-skin cloak-making; the stories represented on the cloak were considered discussions about connections to Country and kin, and of the cloak as an expression of south-east Australian Aboriginal peoples' sovereignty.

Karen also understood the cloak as a vehicle of exchange between north and south, the different groups of artists' connections to their specific countries.

> *Yeah, I learned how to colour [the cloak] and how to burn it. I thought it'd be so hard, but actually it's easy once you get the hang of it… [W]orking with Mitch and Kerri, I really enjoyed it, working together. They showed me their way of … [doing] thing[s] through the cloak, and me sharing my story with them. Yeah, it was a good experience, actually. Because … I like doing challenges with different art mediums.*[76]

The cloak formed a kind of a canvas for thinking about how cultural knowledge, when reanimated and reclaimed from the archive/collections, enables stories to emerge through visual representations, that emphasise exchange networks that have endured across the country for millennia (see Figure 1). This was emphasised by Kerri:

> *So that exchange that's happening where we [Ngukurr and my family] had different strengths… in story and what we knew. [J]ust being able to bounce [off each other]… I think that comes from collaborating [and] who we are as Aboriginal people…having those common threads. But also for us as artists … as culture-makers, we were able to share some of that, which Karen loved… she's a painter as well.*[77]

Figure 14. Detail Newcastle/Ngukurr cloak showing troop carrier (troopy) above, and yarlbun (water lilies) in the centre, June 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

Caring for Country:Yarlbun (water lilies) and the archive

The field trip to Ngukurr coincided with the beginning of the region's dry season. Traditional methods of burning off – also called fire-stick farming – were taking place around the community, a method used to rejuvenate Country, to promote new growth and clean out debris.[78] Plants provide important bush foods and medicines, and only a few days after a burn, new growth emerges. While stories of plants and their uses were discussed by the artists, a handful of images in the Ngukurr Collection, shown to Karen on the first day of the visit, were the catalyst for further storytelling. These included the significance of water lilies – prolific in billabongs at that time of year – as bush food, as well as the impact of climate change on collecting these plants from their waterways (Figure 14).

Figure 15. Young girls holding yarlbun, c.1920–1940, the reverend Len Harris collection- mission life at Roper River and Oenpelli. Creator/photographer John W. Harris, c.1920–1940, Call Number Harris.JO1.BW-N04902_01, AIATSIS.

Figure 16. Seed cake in bark collected by Baldwin Spencer, 1911, Museums Victoria X100569. Associated with the seed cake, a bark container (X17070) and a grinding stone used to make the seed cake (X17069) were also collected. Photo Fran Edmonds.

Black and white photographs, taken circa 1930s by John Harris (of the Church Missionary Society), show young women from Ngukurr standing on the banks of the Roper River holding bundles of water lilies (Figure 15).[79] In Ngukurr, sections of the lily are named as jaw jaw (lily flower), yarlbun (lily pod) and garbudugudu (lily bud). Yarlbun was traditionally ground to make flour for seed-cake or bread.[80] A sample of the seed-cake was collected by Baldwin Spencer during his 1911 trip to Roper River, and is housed in Melbourne Museum. It was viewed by the Ngukurr visitors, Karen and Daphne in 2021, and Robin and Owen in 2023. The seed-cake is still largely intact and, in the museum store, sits alongside the bark carrier it was originally stored in and the grinding stone used to make the seed cake (Figure 16).

While the image of the girls (all unnamed) is specific to a time and place (i.e., early 20th century life on the mission along the Roper River), the stories that emerged in relation to harvesting yarlbun were directed to caring for Country and kin in a present and ongoing way. As Robin explains, the waterlilies are kin, they are his mother's Dreaming, an integral part of Ngukurr's social organisation, which determines how people are obligated to each other and Country.[81]

The impact of climate change on cultural practices and ecological disruption due to introduced species was another story elicited by the archival photograph of girls holding yarlbun, as people's capacity to harvest water lilies and other bush foods has been affected today.[82] Karen Rogers remembers how important diving for water lilies was when she was young and how this has changed due to the surge in the saltwater crocodile population in the Roper River. While an influx of crocodiles is related to a number of factors, including rising sea levels and water temperatures,[83] Karen's story focuses on her observations of a rapidly changing ecosystem:

> *Even in billabongs, you see those yarlbun and jaw jaw, because you collect them from the billabongs. But you can't go and get them now because you're scared of the crocodiles. Because the crocodiles are not only in the river now, they're in the billabongs as well. So, they've been breeding very much, them crocodiles.*
>
> *In my point of view, I think it's because … maybe the goanna used to eat the crocodile egg. But then the cane toad came in, less goanna now [because the goanna would eat the cane toad and be poisoned]…That's my theory…*
>
> *It's very scary now. You can't go swim la[84] billabong…When I was a teenager, I swam that river a couple of times…But after a crocodile came in, we stopped … So a lot of things have changed. Childhood was good memories. We had a lot of fun. I used to go on the other side of the river with Robin. Robin used to hunt goanna all the time…After cane toad come, we couldn't find any now…Oh, golly…I miss eating goanna.[85]*

Along with the crocodile story and the implications of climate change on collecting bush tucker, the image of the girls holding the yarlbun inspired a conversation between Karen, Kerri, and Mitch about the lily pods being ground to make damper. This motivated Mitch and Kerri to reflect on the bush foods and medicines that they were familiar with in the southeast. The murrnong daisy, for example, is a tuberous root that can be cooked and eaten (Figure 17). A picture of Wadawurrung women in 1835 near Indented Heads, Victoria, digging for yams, while wearing cloaks, and carrying digging sticks and baskets, was sketched by the early explorer and collector John Helder Wedge, connecting this practice to place.[86]

The analogies drawn across countries by their knowledge holders – Karen, Kerri, and Mitch – again illustrate the intersection between the conventional/Western archival record (often with very little information from or about First Nations people) and knowledge-exchange as determined by knowledge-holders themselves.

Figure 17. Newcastle/Ngukurr cloak with details of murrnong daisy (bottom right), Bunjil's feather (bottom), red quandong seeds and kangaroo tooth necklace above blue fairy wren (top left) on Newcastle/Ngukurr cloak, June 2023.

The importance of maintaining cultural knowledge, to potentially reverse devastating ecological change, is exemplified in knowing what plants to use for making things, when to collect them, and what to eat.[87] Expressing this knowledge through stories on the cloak means understanding art-making as knowledge preservation. As legal scholar Terri Janke (Meriam / Wuthathi) and colleagues advocate, keeping Country healthy relies on people continuing to 'sing and dance; make paintings, artefacts and other artforms; tell stories and write books; walk on Country; listen and talk with Country; take photos; and speak Indigenous languages'.[88]

The exchange between artists was firmly aligned with their insistence that the cloak was about relationships, collaborations, and cultural connections that told stories to keep Country healthy, and was expressed by Mitch:

> *The image [photo] of the water lily, the yarlbun…telling that story of those bush medicines…throughout this experience, there's been a lot of sharing of stories…like how do we look after our Country, how does the mob up north look after their Country… A lot of spending time up in Ngukurr talking with Elders, talking with community members, sharing things from the southeast practices that we do, things like [using] kangaroo sinew [to bind kangaroo teeth to leather straps when making necklaces], how possum skin cloaks are made, why we use certain colours [from ochres and plants] on our designs and vice versa from the north… [I]t's one of those things where it runs along that same line of the traditional practices of sharing knowledge through the story lines or through trade routes and today…our more contemporary example of that, of going up and actually using cloaks as that medium of sharing those stories and continuing to grow our…cultural knowledge on both ends.*[89]

The stories that emerged in relation to the digitised collections and the storytelling on the cloak, as Mitch articulates, recognise the relationships and knowledge of Country that exist

between the past and present. As Wiradjuri librarian and curator Nathan 'mudyi' Sentance emphasises, when considering the return of digital collections, for Aboriginal people, the photographs of people and objects 'are Ancestors'; they are not just inanimate images, so it's imperative to ensure collections reflect and provide accurate accounts as determined by Indigenous knowledge holders. Speaking back to and centring Indigenous knowledge in the archival record,[90] disrupts the colonial endeavour to decide how knowledge is labelled, stored, and categorised. Giving people control over their archival material, including the way stories are told, determines how their collections are made accessible and appropriately cared for into the future.[91]

Storytelling over digitised collections can run parallel with contemporary creative practices, correcting (mis)information from the past and eliciting old (and new) stories in innovative ways. This process supports Indigenous wellbeing, restoring knowledge and control over culture and heritage.[92] The cloak-*marking* demonstrates Indigenous knowledge as embodied – held by people rather than located on a shelf – and as the LA project has encountered, these knowledges are not necessarily replicable or made easily accessible in a digital database.

Governance and community control

As the artists were determining designs and seeking permissions for creating designs on the cloak, Fran was showing photographs held on an external hard drive, to Ngukurr Elders. This allowed senior knowledge holders to engage with collections of Ancestral material, including (but not limited to) photographs of people and places, and digitised images of material culture from the Roper River region housed in museums, along with footage from ABC news items and documentaries about Ngukurr. A collection of early Ngukurr artworks from the late 1980s–1990s (mainly acrylic on canvas) was also shown to artists at Ngukurr arts centre. This initiated pathways for ongoing conversation about how the material could be updated by community so that their stories could be included in the collection. For instance, updating missing information (such as people's names), correcting misinformation, and determining how the material could be used in the future.

At the time of the LA team's Ngukurr visit, there was no appropriate digital content management system available at the University of Melbourne, where the ARC project was hosted; nor appropriate digital infrastructure that could hold the relations and interconnections of Indigenous knowledge systems.[93] This meant that the only viable option to 'return' the archive to community was via an external hard drive, connected to a laptop.[94] The external hard drive was only available during the project team's visit to Ngukurr, as there were no systems in place in the community which would ensure the data could be protected to meet cultural protocols.

Elders were interested in finding out how the digital material could be housed on Country, so that people could access it and tell stories over the images in culturally-appropriate and -safe ways. The Yugul Mangi Living Archive Committee (YMLAC) was formed, which included representatives from the Ngukurr clans. The YMLAC provides governance over the archive as the project works towards determining an online content management system that will meet community expectations; this is a work in progress.

The YMLAC was interested in having Ngukurr young people view the early mission photographs in the NKCL archive while it was available. And so, a slide show evening of the collections was organised at the Ngukurr recreation hall, a place where young people gather each evening to play sport and listen to music. Elder Robin Rogers hosted the event, pointing out details of each of the old images on the screen – mainly black and

Figure 18. Robin explaining photo to audience from Len Harris collection, AIATSIS. Photo Fran Edmonds.

white photographs from the Len Harris collection (mentioned above) of people on the Roper River Mission, as well as cultural items from Ngukurr held in Museums Victoria. People at the event listened intently while Robin explained the pictures in Kriol,[95] pointing out their Ancestors, what they were doing, and who they were connected or related to (Figure 18).

Alongside the slide show, Kerri was showing the cloak, which she had brought from the arts centre, with its unfinished designs. Young people were interested in touching and feeling the cloak – an unusual object in Ngukurr (Figure 19).

The synchronicity between the community slideshow and the sharing of the cloak revealed what a LA might be: the processes of telling stories, activating Ancestral memories, and holding-together the past, present, and future in an 'archival multiverse'.[96] For Kerri, the event signified how 'archiving' across multiple media offered a space for contesting colonial regimes of power, including the Western archive's authority in determining who is and who is not Aboriginal, and what is or is not authentic Aboriginal culture. The whitewashing of Aboriginal histories in the archive reveals the continuing trauma that the archive carries for Aboriginal people. Yet at the Ngukurr recreation hall, different Indigenous knowledges were simultaneously acknowledged and transmitted, interculturally and intergenerationally. There was respect for sovereignty embedded in specific Countries.[97]

Kerri explains:

> *[Ngukurr's] respect for us…that we were different, that our experience of colonisation was different … But they…respected, they understood [why we looked different]. We didn't have*

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Figure 19. Kerri with cloak showing unfinished markings/design. Daphne and Robin, on the right, assist with holding the cloak. Photo Fran Edmonds.

> *to explain ourselves. They respected what we knew, and how we knew it. I think that was what made it a lot easier to go there. Especially when we were in the hall and Robin had to tell the kids [in Kriol]…basically I reckon he said 'she probably looks like a white lady, but she's not, she's the same as you'.*[98]

The storytelling over archival photographs and via the making of an interculturally-produced cloak exemplify *a different kind of archive*. Knowledge is being shared, held, and activated between people and communities in ways that support Indigenous agency over Indigenous knowledge systems.

Institutional limitations and the Living Archive

In January 2024, Robin Rogers was employed by the LA Project as the Ngukurr community archivist, spending hours taking printouts of the photographic collections held in the archive (many from mission times) out to community, collecting stories of people and places. He then wrote any information by hand on the printout and scanned, then emailed it to the project archivist (and co-author here) Alannah Croom, for her to upload and enter into a database.

These processes reflect the limitations of institutions to support collections of digitised material to be made accessible in culturally appropriate ways.[99] The LA was hindered by the institutions' persistence with a one-size-fits-all approach to digital/archiving projects. The University of Melbourne closed the e-Scholarships Research Centre (eSRC) in 2020, which we'd proposed (in the original ARC Australian Research Council Indigenous Discovery

Project [INDP]) as the intellectual home for research into a database(s) that could support and reflect Indigenous knowledges as a LA. Gavan McCarthy, former director of the eSRC, had developed the Online Heritage Resource Management (OHRM) system, a database which was phased out when the university closed the Centre.

Initially, the LA digital collections (both NKCL and MACL) were ingested into the OHRM, and we'd intended to experiment with the platform's relational capacity and explore any opportunities it afforded for community access. As the university stopped supporting the OHRM, they acquired an alternative system, Heurist (developed by the University of Sydney) intending it to be a catch-all solution to the institution's digital projects' needs. Migrating data from the OHRM to Heurist – painstaking and time-consuming work – revealed the limitations of the new system to support Indigenous knowledge. Heurist was unable to easily (1) accommodate privacy restrictions for secret/sacred material; (2) provide an easily navigable website for people with languages other than English; or (3) facilitate the recording of stories orally into the program.

Future work is necessary to develop and implement an online system that can support Indigenous knowledge systems as relational, and can reflect the connections between the Ngukurr (NKCL) and Maree Clarke/Southeast Australia (MACL) collections as revealed, nourished and extended through the LA project. Community control of the archive is imperative.[100]

At the conclusion of the LA project's ARC funding (2024), we (the authors) are still exploring avenues for making data accessible, usable, and capable of supporting Indigenous knowledge systems, in ways managed and determined by the communities connected to the project. In the meantime, Robin continues to send back the hard copies of photos with his hand-written information, as well as occasional oral recordings made on an iPhone, all uploaded to and filed on a secure data management platform, which is for storage purposes only.

The significance of institutional inertia when positioned alongside community initiatives to access their material in archives is explained by Kerri:

> *A lot of the revitalisation [of our knowledge, histories, material culture]…is based on us having to go and look and find, and sometimes just by chance, things showing up in archives that belong to us. So I think us owning them and being able to contribute to them as we feel we would like to, and share what knowledge we would like to, have control over who we're sharing the knowledge with and how. It's vital. I think it's just so difficult though too, I think it's been my experience in working on the [Living] Archive…It just seems like really tricky to get the institutions…to change their minds. Things still have a dollar value. Things still require certain people within the institutions to actually take an interest in what we're trying to say…That still exists, no matter how far forward we've come.*[101]

Conclusion

Reclaiming the archives: keeping culture and community strong

Karen, Robin, Kerri, Mitch and Maree agree that having access to *their* materials via a LA is important in supporting younger generations' knowledge of their culture and heritage. A LA can and will inspire future art-making and storytelling. This is critical for people to remain connected to their culture in ways that support their health and wellbeing, and for the sustainability of Country.

Kerri articulates this with respect to the revival of possum-skin cloak-making:

> *Making cloaks within community, people feel so grateful and so privileged… I think when something belongs to them and you're giving it back, there's a deeper feeling inside their bodies, almost like a healing that occurs, a real reassurance. A lifting of the body … [that says] 'this is ours and we can continue to do this.'…This is something that we can actually do, and share with other people…*[102]

Similarly, for Ngukurr, learning from Mitch about sinew making (Figure 20) connected the design of the kangaroo tooth necklace on the cloak with a new story of knowledge exchange and of reviving stories from the archive from Indigenous knowledge perspectives. Kerri explains:

> *when you think about that kangaroo tooth necklace, …it represent[ed] the resurgence of the practice, and Uncle Len Tregonning (Gunai, 1954–2017) was a part of reviving that practice [he is represented on the cloak by his totem, a blue fairy wren, and the kangaroo tooth necklace]. But if you think about it, Ngukurr can actually tell a newer story about how we came and we shared that story, and what they did and how [Mitch] showed them how to use the sinew to bind the kangaroo teeth. So there're new stories for that cloak as well. I think that's really great …*[103]

Art-making and cultural practices are ways of caring for Country, too. Robin articulates the urgent need to look after waterways, and the significance of telling stories through art-making:

> *Them flower[s] … We can do that, but we need to go out where we've got birds and all that [collect feathers]. We've got to collect all them seeds and shells and everything, you know, everything changing now. All them shells are disappearing from the beaches … We can try to make it come back, but we can [also] … look at the art [and objects in museums and galleries]. All them lily [seed cakes] … made long time ago, [now] in that museum…I don't know. And they [we] don't do that anymore … We've got this mob of artists here [in Ngukurr].*

Figure 20. Robin Rogers learning from Mitch Mahoney to prepare kangaroo sinew to make a kangaroo tooth necklace. June 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

> *You know, we've got to just talk to this mob here first … Some of them are doing really good [artwork]…*[104]

Aligned with this is the ongoing challenge to ensure that Aboriginal knowledge is central and accessible to any future work on the archive. For Kerri, this includes the safe-keeping of the cloak alongside protocols for access and use.

> *The stories are so important…Karen and I [share]…the custodians[hip] of this cloak… because there are stories on there that I need them to help me tell, and they need me to help them tell … We need each other in this because it holds such cultural significance, those stories. So to do that, we'll develop the… protocols around this cloak, they'll be very strong and very much well negotiated between the two communities.*[105]

Reciprocity and exchange – 'It's about the making'

Through the LA project, we've come to understand that exchanges and relationality – fostered through collaborative art-making, and often drawing from archival collections – are continuing to keep Indigenous knowledges strong (Figure 21). Kerri talks about sharing in ways that are embedded in Country and that enliven Country in tangible ways:

Figure 21. Finished kangaroo tooth necklace gifted to Robin Rogers by Mitch Mahoney, Ngukurr, June 2023. Photo Fran Edmonds.

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> *I think Ngukurr was really about sharing story, and stories of Country and then using pigments and the like [ochre, natural dyes] from both Countries to create that cloak. That's the similarity. The colours on that cloak are all… of the Country. Our Country and theirs.*[106]

Making, together, has been a central through line of all of our work; this is the LA.[107] Kerri has said:

> *The story of the cloak is, in a way, so much bigger*. ***It's about the making****…the cloak is one of those… piece[s] that brought [the Living Archive] all together…[I]f you think about the pelts, the stitching, bringing it together, bringing the stories together, bringing the resurgence of stuff, you know [cultural knowledge], finding stuff in archives, it really, really brought us together…It's got so many stories.*[108]

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Mellon New Directions fellowship (2023–2026) 'Digital Stewardship, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Archival Justice: The Living Archive of Aboriginal Art'.

Notes

1. Karen Rogers provided this phrase in Kriol, when asked about the possum-skin cloak workshop in Ngukurr as a place to share stories.
2. Maree Clarke, Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) Annual Meeting, (MCG), Loris Williams Memorial Lecture, Melbourne, 2023.
3. We are not the first to use this phrase 'the living archive'; important precursor examples include: Catherine Bow, Michael Christie, and Brian Devlin, 'Developing a Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages', Language Documentation and Conservation, vol. 8, 2014, pp. 345–60; and Sue McKemmish, Tom Chandler, and Shannon Faulkhead, 'Imagine: A Living Archive of People and Place "Somewhere Beyond Custody"', Archival Science, vol. 19, 2019, pp. 281–301.
4. 'Country', with a a capital C is a way of defining the territories that specific groups of Indigenous Australians' are connected to, their relationships with their land and their knowledge contained within.
5. Louise Gwenneth Phillips and Tracey Bunda, Research through, with and as Storying, Routledge, Oxon, 2018.
6. Karen L Martin and Booran Mirraboopa, 'Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, Ways of Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Research', Journal of Australian Studies, vol. 27, no. 76, 2003, pp. 203–14.
7. Kirsten Thorpe, Kimberly Christen, Lauren Booker, and Monica Galassi, 'Designing Archival Information Systems Through Partnerships with Indigenous Communities', Australasian Journal of Information Systems, vol. 25, 2021, pp. 1–22.
8. Jeanine Leane and Natalie Harkin, 'When Records Speak We Listen: Conversations with the Archive', in Katherine Biber, Trish Luker, and Priya Vaughan (eds.), Law's Documents: Authority, Materiality, Aesthetics, Routledge, New York, NY, 2022, pp. 51–70.
9. Kirsten Thorpe, 'Speaking Back to Colonial Collections: Building Living into Aboriginal Archives', Artlink Indigenous: Storytelling in a Digital World, vol. 39, no. 2, 2019, pp. 42–9.
10. Kate ten Buuren and Maya Hodge, 'The Collective Movements Education Kit (Developed by Pierra Van Sparkes, Curator Engagement, Monash University Museum of Art), for the Collective Movements exhibition (5 May – 23 July 2022)', 2023, p. 15, available at https://netsvictoria.org.au/education/, accessed 1 February 2024.

11. Indi Clarke and Maddee Clark, '"Just Doing and Being"': Collective Movements and the Everyday Life of Indigenous Futurity', 2023, available at https://netsvictoria.org.au/exhibition/collective-movements/introduction/#/essays/just-doing-and-being-collective-movements-and-the-everyday-life-of-indigenous-futurity, accessed 1 February 2024.
12. For more on the trauma of the archive including mishandling of information, see Kirsten Thorpe, Shannon Faulkhead, and Lauren Booker, 'Transforming the Archive: Returning and Connecting Indigenous Repatriation Records', in Cressida Fforde, C Timothy McKeown, and Honor Keeler (eds.), The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Repatriation: Return, Reconcile, Renew, Routledge, Oxon, 2020, pp. 822–34.
13. Originally trained as a historian, Tony Birch (Koori) later left the discipline of history behind, and now tells Aboriginal stories through creative writing. For more, see Tony Birch, On Kim Scott: Writers on Writers, Black Inc, Collingwood, 2024.
14. Maree Clarke 2023.
15. An important exception to this is historian Lynette Russell (Wotjobaluk)'s Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship (2020–2025) entitled 'Global Encounters & First Nations Peoples: 1000 Years of Australian History' (FL190100161). For more, see the newly-launched interactive website https://globalencounters.net/, which emphasizes over a millennium of encounters in which Indigenous people engaged with newcomers to their Lands on their own terms.
16. For more, see Kirsten Thorpe, 'Unclasping the White Hand: Reclaiming and Refiguring the Archives to Support Indigenous Wellbeing and Sovereignty', PhD Thesis, Monash University, Melbourne, 2021; also Mike Jones and Rebe Taylor, 'Beyond Access: (Re)Designing Archival Guides for Changing Landscapes', Archival Science, vol. 24, 2024, pp. 143–66.
17. For more, see Amanda Jane Reynolds, Debra Couzens, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, and Treahna Hamm, Wrapped in a Possum Skin Cloak: The Tooloyn Koortakay Collection in the National Museum of Australia, National Museum of Australia Press, Canberra, 2005. Also see https://museumsvictoria.com.au/article/the-timeless-and-living-art-of-possum-skin-cloaks/.
18. For more, see Vicki Couzens, 'Possum Skin Cloak Story Reconnecting Communities and Culture: Telling the Story of Possum Skin Cloaks Kooramookyan-an Yakeeneeyt-an Kooweekooweeyan', PhD Thesis, RMIT University, Melbourne, 2017; also Shawana Andrews, 'Cloaked in Strength – How Possum Skin Cloaking Can Support Aboriginal Women's Voice in Family Violence Research', AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples, vol. 16, no. 2, 2020, pp. 108–16.
19. In 2005–2006, Maree, Lee, Vicki and Treahna worked with the 38 language groups around Victoria, returning the practice and knowledge of possum skin cloak making. This culminated in the largest ceremonial gathering of 38 Elders/community representatives from each tribe in over 150 years, wearing their cloaks to the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. This marked the beginning of cloaks being worn for contemporary ceremonial purposes and openings of significance, including academic parades. For an in-depth discussion of the revival of possum-skin cloak story and the occasions for which cloaks are used, see Henry L Atkinson, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch, Genevieve Grieves, Samantha Hamilton, Holly Jones-Amin, Mandy Nicholson, and Amanda Reynolds, '"Wrapped In Country": Conserving and Representing Possum-Skin Cloaks As In/Tangible Heritage', in Mary M Brooks and Dinah D Eastop (eds.), Refashioning and Redress: Conserving and Displaying Dress, Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, 2016, pp. 49–64.
20. Maree Clarke 2023.
21. Reynolds et al. 2005.
22. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Zed Books Ltd., London, 2019; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K Wayne Yang (eds.), Indigenous and Decolonising Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View, Routledge, New York, NY, 2019.
23. See Tyson Yunkaporta, 'Aboriginal Pedagogy: Integrity in Academic and Cultural Practice', Holistic Education Review, Issue: Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Authors Going Deeper with Holistic Education, vol. 3, no. 1, May 2023, available at https://her.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/her/article/view/2650, accessed 10 July 2024; and Tyson Yunkaporta and Sue McGinty, 'Reclaiming Aboriginal Knowledge at the Cultural Interface', Australian Educational Researcher, vol. 36, 2009, pp. 55–72.
24. See Angela Ziebell, Tina L Overton, and Tyson Yunkaporta, 'Australian Indigenous Knowledge in the Undergraduate Teaching Laboratory', International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics Education, vol. 29, no. 2, 2021, pp. 32–46.
25. Ellen M Alvord and Aaron F Miller, 'Lessons from the Making of a Possum-Skin Cloak', Mount Holyoke College Art Museum Magazine and Journal, 2023–24, pp. 14–15, available at https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/about/mhcam-journal, accessed 10 July 2024.

26. Kerri Clarke, interview for Living Archive project, 31 January 2024.
27. Sue McKemmish, 'Traces: Document, Record, Archive, Archives', in Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, and Frank Upward (eds.), Archives: Recordkeeping in Society, Topics in Australasian Library and Information Studies, no. 24, Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 2005, pp. 1–20.
28. Martin Nakata, 'The Cultural Interface', The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, vol. 36, no. S1: (Re)Contesting Indigenous Knowledges & Indigenous Studies, 2007, pp. 7–14. See also Yunkaporta and McGinty 2009.
29. Kerri Clarke 2024.
30. We've mentioned above the two cloaks held at Museums Victoria in Melbourne; there are also cloak fragments held in ethnographic collections in Berlin, Leiden, and London. Two cloaks have been recorded as being held in the Pigorini, Rome (see Carol Cooper, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in Overseas Museums, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1989); however, subsequent research has revealed that the Pigorini presently holds no cloaks, and email correspondence with Carol Cooper and Amanda Reynolds confirm this (that is, the original mention of these cloaks may have been mistaken; or the cloaks disintegrated or were lost).
31. For more on the Big Picture program see: https://www.bigpicture.org.au/mdactivity/999.
32. Kerri Clarke 2024.
33. In 1966, Vincent Lingiari (Gurindji), led a walk-off of Aboriginal people from the Wave Hill cattle station as a protest against exploitative labour conditions and unjust wage withholding. This was a defining moment in a long-term campaign for people in the Northern Territory to get their land back. Although Dexter was not Gurindji, he was one of a number of Aboriginal men from the Northern Territory who were integral in supporting this movement (for more, see Charlie Ward, A Handful of Sand: The Gurindji Struggle, After the Walk-Off, Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, 2016).
34. See Julie Kimber, 'A Right to be Troublesome: The Arrest of Dexter Daniels and the Politics of Vagrancy Laws', in Bobbie Oliver (ed.), Labour History in the New Century, Black Swan Press, Perth, 2009, pp. 167–80.
35. For more, see the Living Archive blog: https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/livingarchiveofaboriginalart/2021/06/07/from-ngukurr-to-newcastle-surprising-discoveries-in-the-copley-archive-by-associate-professor-kate-senior/.
36. Previously known as Ngukurr News; for more, see Kate Senior, Richard Chenhall, and Daphne Daniels, 'Twenty Years of the Ngukurr News/Nyus: Exploring the Interconnectivity and Influence of a Remote Indigenous Community through the Archive', in Frances Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, and Maree Clarke (eds.), ngargee // Coming Together to Celebrate: Southeast Australian Aboriginal Art, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2024, pp. 151–70. Daphne is also featured in the Stronger Communities report advocating for Ngukurr people's right to strong decision-making about their community, see Stronger Communities and Yugul Mangi Development Aboriginal Corporation, Community Engagement Study & Plan | Ngukurr 2019, Australian Government, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, 2019.
37. See Kimber 2009. Also see this newspaper article, 'From N.T. to E. Gippsland', Snowy River Mail Wednesday, 30 September 1970, p. 5, which outlines a trip Dexter made to Lake Tyers in 1970. Available at TROVE, April 2025: https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/283249576?searchTerm=Dexter%20Daniels.
38. See https://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/video/aboriginal-female-activist-discussing-aboriginal-land-news-footage/664087664. With thanks to Julie Kimber, Swinburne University of Technology, for providing information about this footage.
39. See Ward 2016.
40. Sabra Thorner, Fran Edmonds, Maree Clarke, and Paola Balla, 'Maree's Backyard: Intercultural Collaborations for Indigenous Sovereignty in Melbourne', Oceania, vol. 88, no. 3, 2018, pp. 269–91.
41. The river reed canoe and its design are a revitalized and reclaimed practice in Tasmania, not unlike possum skin cloaks on the mainland. For more information on a senior custodian of this practice, see this link to Rex Greeno (palawa): https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/participants/senior-craftsman-rex-greeno-and-son-dean-greeno/.
42. The feather flowers in Museums Victoria (MV) have no information relating to the maker or the date they were made. They have a tag that indicates they were found in an MV storeroom and catalogued in 1965–6.
43. For more on this, see Senior et al. 2024; also Fran Edmonds, Maree Clarke, Kate Senior, and Daphne Daniels, 'Feather Flowers, Home and a Global Pandemic: Collaborative Storytelling and the Relationality of Things', in Daniel X Harris, Mary Elizabeth Luka, and Annette N Markham (eds.), Massive/Micro Autoethnography: Creative Learning in COVID Times, Springer, Singapore, 2022, pp. 69–98.

44. Sylvia Kleinert, 'Writing Craft/Writing History', Humanities Research. Special Issue: Indigenous Knowledge, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 77–96, cf. Fran Edmonds with Maree Clarke, 'Sort of Like Reading a Map': A Community Report of the Survival of South-East Australian Aboriginal Art since 1834, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health [Lowitja], Darwin, 2009.
45. To see Walter Kolbong Rogers describing the making of a ceremonial headdress for dancing (including feathers from specific birds), see https://ictv.com.au/video/item/5775.
46. Louise Hamby, 'The Forgotten Collection: Baskets Reveal Histories', in Martin Thomas and Margo Neale (eds.), Exploring the Legacy of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition, ANU Press, Canberra, 2011, pp. 213–38. http://doi.org/10.22459/ELALE.06.2011.
47 Phillip A Clarke, 'A Review of Early Indigenous Artefacts Incorporating Bird Materials in the Lower Murray River Region, South Australia', Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia, vol. 142, no. 1, 2018, pp. 27–48.
48. Kleinert 2000.
49. For more on the CMS mission shop, see Peter Carroll, 'Aboriginal Art from Western Arnhem Land', in Peter Loveday and Peter Cook (eds.), Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market, ANU, Canberra, 1983, pp. 44–9.
50. For more on the history of missions in Arnhem Land, see https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/nt/YE00010.
51. All of the heritage languages at Ngukurr (including: Alawa, Marra, Warndarrang, Ngandi, Ngalakgan, Rembarrnga, Wubuy (Nungubuyyu), Wägilak, and Ritharrŋu) are now endangered, and the main language spoken in the community today is Kriol. For more information, see https://ngukurrlc.org.au/. The Roper River Mission site moved to higher ground following a devastating flood in 1940; in 1968, the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Government took over management of the town of Roper River. In 1988, the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council took control and renamed the township Ngukurr, and in 2008, the Yugul Mangi Development Aboriginal Corporation was formed, and is the current governance body.
52. A major retrospective of Maree's work, entitled *Ancestral Memories*, was held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2021–22 (for more, see Myles Russell-Cook, Maree Clarke: Ancestral Memories, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2021). For more on this theme as a through-line in Clarke's oeuvre, see Maddee Clark 2021, Artist Maree Clarke's Extraordinary Practice Celebrated in First Solo Show by a Living Victorian Aboriginal Artist at the NGV, Australian Broadcasting Commission, available at www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-13/ngv-exhibition-maree-clarke-ancestral-memories/100280456, accessed 11 July 2024.
53. For more on this, see Walter Kolbong Rogers and Jude Emmett, 'Melabat Wanbala', ANKA Arts Backbone: Cultural Legacy Edition, vol. 17, no. 2 and vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, p. 29.
54. Maree is vegan and will not purposefully harm animals in any way. She sources many materials in her artmaking from roadkill – kangaroo sinew, teeth, and bones; echidna quills; bird feathers – and firmly believes she's giving the animals another life via her knowledge-transmission to nieces and nephews whom she brings along on her trips.
55. Karen Rogers, interview for Living Archive project, 25 January 2024.
56. See the short video 'Exploring the Ngukurr Feather Flowers: from Collections to Community', director Simon Rose, The Great Aboriginal People, available at https://vimeo.com/667549177.
57. For more, see a short film on the ARC team's visit to Ngukurr: 'Coming Together: A Possum Skin Cloak, Cultural Exchanges and Caring for Country', 2023, available at https://vimeo.com/887123703, accessed 23 July 2025.
58. The four semi-moieties (totems), Budal, Mumbali, Murungun, and Guyal, have deep connections to animals, seasons, weather, and land. A visual diagram of the connection between the semi-moieties, the seasons and animals, can be found in the 'Stronger Communities for Children, Storybook', 2022, p. 35. This publication also provides an explanation of the Ngukurr (Yugul Mangi) moiety system and its role in determining community governance structures (pp. 36–64). Available at https://communityworks.com.au/project/the-stronger-communities-for-children-program-storybook/ (scroll down to download the full storybook).
59. Robin Rogers, interview for Living Archive project, 24 January 2024.
60. Karen Rogers 2024.
61. For more on Glenda Nicholls and her craftwork, including feather flowers, see https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-17/master-weaver-glenda-nicholls-preserving-indigenous-culture/100074988.

62. For one of the earliest discussions regarding the connections between Northern Territory land rights campaigns and the art/craft economy, particularly in the Roper River region, see Toni Bauman, 'Art, Craft and the Land – Alawa National Culture – Foraging and the Traditional Economy', in Peter Loveday and Peter Cook (eds.), Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market, The Australian National University North Australia Research Unit, Darwin, 1983, pp. 52–9. More recently, acrylics on canvas have been used to support Native Title Claims, for instance the Ngurrara Canvas 1997 (for more, see https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/ngurrara; https://aboriginalartdirectory.com/ngurrara-the-great-sandy-desert-canvas-2/; and https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-23/giant-historic-artwork-ngurrara-canvas-returned-home/9074446, accessed 11 July 2024).
63. The river was symbolic of all the rivers that were significant to the artists and included: the Roper River for Ngukurr; the Barka for Barkindji; the Murray/Dhungala for Wemba Wemba; the Yarra for Boon Wurrung; and the Hunter/Coquun River in Newcastle – Wonnarua, Worimi and Awabakal.
64. Kerri Clarke 2024.
65. Another precedent for the practice of possum skin cloak making being shared with Aboriginal groups from outside the southeast includes members of the Research Unit for Indigenous Arts and Culture (RUIAC, Wilin Centre, Victoria College of the Arts (VCA), University of Melbourne), with people from the remote North and Kimberley regions of Australia. In 2017, a workshop took place, at the VCA on Boon Wurrung Country, where the biganga ('possum skin cloak' in Yorta Yorta language) was sewn, smoked, marked and sung to create the 'founding document for… RUIAC'. The process was to cement relationships through collaborative knowledge production and exchange with Aboriginal people from northern Australia. For more, see Tiriki Onus, Sally Treloyn, Megan McPherson and Reuben Brown, 'Biganga Bayiya (Singing the Possum): Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge in the Academy', in Frances Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, and Maree Clarke (eds.), ngargee // Coming Together to Celebrate: Southeast Australian Aboriginal Art, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2024, pp. 85–98.
66. A binary still exists in the imaginary of mainstream Australia as Aboriginal people from the north are often considered 'real Aboriginals', compared with people from urban /southeast regions, as they fit a stereotype of living remotely, speaking language and being phenotypically very dark-skinned.
67. Clarke 2024.
68. Kerri Clarke 2024.
69. Kerri Clarke 2024.
70. The truck Dexter drove is now located in the collection of the National Museum of Australia; for more, see https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/blog/memento-of-wave-hill-walk-off. A photograph of Dexter and others attempting to fix the truck in 1976 was donated by Meredith Burgmann to the Living Archive project for inclusion in the NKCL (see Fig 4a). A copy is included in Ward 2016 (colour photo inset). Karen Rogers has recently made a painting of this photo (see Fig 4b), along with others from the Dexter Daniels collection. Digital copies are in the NKCL database.
71. Kerri Clarke email to Kate Senior, Fran Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, and Richard Chenhall, 8 June 2023.
72. Karen published a children's book in 2021, about travelling out bush with her grandfather in a troopy when she was a child. It is written in Kriol and English. See Karen Rogers, Main Abija My Grandad, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2021.
73. Kerri completed a Master's degree in 2023 through the prestigious Atlantic Fellows for Social Equity (AFSE) program, hosted at the University of Melbourne.
74. See Ward 2016, pp. 28–9. Ward mentions Walter's involvement in NTCARR (Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights) and their support for the Gurindji and Dexter's fight for equal pay.
75. For multiple examples of the breadth of Indigenous storytelling as a historical record, as a form of teaching and learning, and as an expression of Indigenous culture and identity, see Jo-Ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jenny Bol, Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo (eds.), Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology, Zed Books, London, 2019.
76. Karen Rogers 2024.
77. Kerri Clarke 2024.
78. For more on this, see Victor Steffensen, Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia, Hardie Grant Travel, Melbourne, 2020.
79. See Reverend Len Harris Collection: Mission Life at Roper River and Oenpelli, Creator: John W. Harris, c1920–1942, Call Number: Harris.J01.BW, held in the collection of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

80. For further discussion of the Roper River seed bread, see Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe, Country: Future Fires, Future Farming, Thames & Hudson, Melbourne, 2021, p. 62.
81. Robin Rogers 2024. Dreaming references cosmological connections to significant sites on Country; these are recorded in song, stories, dance, and art, passed down through thousands of years. Dreaming stories are connected to kinship systems and determine one's rights and obligations to Country and kin (see Terri Janke, Zena Cumpston, Rosemary Hill, Emma Woodward, Pia Harkness, Stephanie von Gavel, Joe Morrison, Australia State of the Environment 2021: Indigenous. Independent Report to the Australian Government Minister for the Environment, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2021, pp. 14–17, available at https://soe.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-07/soe2021-Indigenous.pdf, accessed 11 July 2024.
82. In 2016, the late Cherry Daniels (Ngandi), pioneer of the Ngukurr Rangers program, discussed the significance of the billabong Dreaming, including yarlbun. These embrace Ancestral knowledge and ceremonies important to conservation of billabongs and sustainability of water lily growth. Today, intercultural/two-way knowledge exchange using Western and Indigenous scientific methods is part of a program to control the invasion of introduced species impacting the wellbeing of waterways. For more information, see https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2016-07-07/way-of-the-water-lilies-where-science-meets-the-billabong/7571206; also see Cherry Wulumirr Daniels, Ngukurr Yangbala Rangers, Shaina Russell, Emilie J Ens, 'Empowering Young Aboriginal Women to Care for Country: Case Study of the Ngukurr Yangbala Rangers, Remote Northern Australia', Ecological Management & Restoration, vol. 23, no. S1, January 2022, pp. 53–63.
83. For recent reporting on the influx of crocodiles in the region, see https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-27/nt-saltwater-crocodile-shift-feral-pigs/101018260.
84. Karen sometimes intersperses her conversation with Kriol, 'la' is Kriol for 'at, in, on, to, into, with, along'. See the Kriol Dictionary, available at https://meigimkriolstrongbala.org.au/en_au/resource/online-kriol-english-dictionary/, accessed 11 July 2024.
85. Karen Rogers 2024.
86. To see the image referred to, go to: Wedge, John Helder: Field book manuscript, Date: 1835–1836, 'Native Women getting Tambourn Roots, 27 August 1835'. Accession Number: MS10768, Image Number 99, State Library Victoria. Available at: https://viewer.slv.vic.gov.au/?entity=IE20233586&file=FL22754585&mode=browse. For more on Wedge, see Rebe Taylor, 'The Wedge Collection and the Conundrum of Humane Colonisation', Meanjin, Summer 2017, available at https://meanjin.com.au/essays/the-wedge-collection-and-the-conundrum-of-humane-colonisation/, accessed 11 July 2024.
87. For a discussion on the importance of Indigenous knowledge holders as decision-makers regarding ecological wellbeing, and of having this knowledge recorded through technological innovations for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to interact with, see Shaina Russell, Rukshana Sultana, Ngukurr Yangbala Rangers, and Emilie J Ens, 'Mepimbat tedul proujek: Indigenous Knowledge of Culturally Significant Freshwater Turtles Addresses Species Knowledge Gaps in Northern Australia', Austral Ecology, vol. 48, 2023, pp. 1306–27.
88. Janke et al., 2021, p. 32.
89. Social Studies of Science (4S) annual conference remarks (Honolulu, Hawaii, USA), 9 November 2023.
90. Archivist Rose Barrowcliffe (Butchulla) argues for centring Indigenous knowledge in, rather than 'speaking back to', western institutions (Narrative Now podcast Episode 9: Indigenous Narratives in Colonial Archives, 15 September 2022; produced by the University of Melbourne and hosted by Ashley Barnwell and Signe Ravn, available at https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/narrative-network/2022/09/15/episode-nine-indigenous-narratives-in-colonial-archives-with-rose-barrowcliffe/, accessed 11 July 2024.
91. For more on digital repatriation, go to Tasha James (Wiradjuri) and Nathan 'mudyi' Sentance (Wiradjuri), Panel Discussion: Archives and Digital Repatriation, AWAYE podcast, ABC Radio National, producer Rudi Bremer, 27 April 2024, available at https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/awaye/panel-discussion-archives-and-digital-repatriation/103760182, accessed 11 July 2024.
92. See Kirsten Thorpe, 'Returning Love to Ancestors Captured in the Archives: Indigenous Wellbeing, Sovereignty and Archival Sovereignty', Archival Science, vol. 24, 2024, pp. 125–42.
93. Examples of Indigenous archiving infrastructure include Mukurtu (see Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson 'Toward slow archives', Archival Science, vol. 19, 2019, pp. 87–116) and Keeping Culture (see Sabra Thorner, Linda Rive, John Dallwitz, and Janet Inyika, 'Never Giving Up: Negotiating, Culture-Making, and the Infinity of the Archive', in Linda Barwick, Jenny Green and Petronella Vaarzon-Morel (eds.), Archival Returns: Central Australia and Beyond, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2019, pp. 263–84); these both require institutional and ongoing funding support.
94. The literature for return and repatriation is now vast, and has ushered in a sea change in the relationships between collecting institutions and their 'source communities'. Some good examples include: Alison K

Brown and Laura Peers, Pictures Bring Us Messages/Sinaakssiiksi aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2006; Joshua Bell, Kimberly Christen, and Mark Turin, 'Introduction: After the Return', Museum Anthropology Review, vol. 7, nos. 1–2, 2013, pp. 1–21; and Linda Barwick, Jennifer Green, and Petronella Vaarzon-Morel (eds.), Archival Returns: Central Australia and Beyond, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2019.

95. Kriol is a 'creole language' – a language born out of colonisation – generally based on the language of the coloniser and adapted to incorporate local idioms. It is spoken across vast tracts of northern Australia. For more, see https://theconversation.com/explainer-the-largest-languagespoken-exclusively-in-australia-kriol-56286, accessed 12 July 2024.
96. See this definition of 'The Archival Multiverse': to explore the concept of 'multiple ways of knowing and practicing' as well as 'multiple narratives co-existing in one space' in relation to Indigenous cultural safety and self-determination (in Kirsten Thorpe, 'Ethics, Indigenous Cultural Safety and the Archives', Archifacts, no. 2, 2018, pp. 33–47).
97. See ANTAR Sovereignty Fact sheet 2022, specifically the quote from Goenpul lawyer Pekeri Ruska and Ambēyaŋ scholar Callum Clayton-Dixon (p. 3). They define sovereignty as: '[t]he ancient reciprocal relationship we have with our lands. This relationship finds its roots in our connection to kin and Country, manifesting in our song, dance and story, our language, ceremony and law. It is vested in the individual, the tribe and the nation. Our sovereignty has endured since the first sunrise – it cannot be handed to us or taken from us. Aboriginal sovereignty can only be expressed or suppressed'. Available at https://antar.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sovereignty-Factsheet.pdf, accessed 11 July 2024.
98. Kerri Clarke 2024.
99. See Thorpe et al. 2021.
100. One way we have attempted to inform people about the project is through an experimental online exhibition created on OMEKA (a free and open-source web platform for collections), of Maree Clarke's early 1990s black and white photographs of NAIDOC marches: available at https://omeka.cloud.unimelb.edu.au/livingarchivenaidoc/.
101. Kerri Clarke 2024.
102. Kerri Clarke 2024.
103. Kerri Clarke 2024.
104. Robin Rogers 2024.
105. Kerri Clarke 2024.
106. Kerri Clarke 2024.
107. We have written about this elsewhere; see Sabra Thorner, Fran Edmonds, Kerri Clarke, and Maree Clarke 'The Making Is the Story: Sovereignty, Sharing, and the Seven Sisters Cloak', Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 89–125 (Special Issue: Indigenous Feminisms Across the World), 2025.
108. Kerri Clarke 2024.