

## EDITORIAL

Welcome to Issue 52.2 of Archives and Manuscripts, where we'll dive deeper into the depths of Australian archival research and practice as it stands in 2025. In this issue, we present four peer-reviewed articles and one reflection article.

Frances Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, Maree Clarke, Kerri Clarke, Karen Rogers, Robin Rogers, Jeanine Leane, Richard Chenhall, Mitch Mahoney, Alannah Croom and Kate Senior explore the ideas and practices of the Living Archive of Aboriginal Art and Knowledge, and in building and sustaining this Living Archive. This article was originally presented as the Loris Williams Memorial Lecture at the 2023 ASA Conference 'Rising to our Challenges' in Melbourne, Australia. It examines the idea that an archive can hold meaning throughout its creation as well as where it may lay to rest, and is then activated by communities throughout the material's ongoing life, sharing cultural knowledge through exchange and collaboration. This article also holds significance as the first single-blind reviewed article published by Archives and Manuscripts – the co-editors would like to thank the authors and reviewers for their collaboration in this process. Supported by the Editorial Board, we offered a single blind review process to the authors as a way to preserve the ownership of the traditional knowledge holders – anonymous authorship as part of the review process was not appropriate in this situation.

This issue also sees two articles explore Australasian archives – Deborah Lee-Talbot delves into the work of Phyllis Mander-Jones and a period of time in her work on the Australian Joint Copying Project, while Michael Alpers, Susannah Castleden, Helena Grehan and Elizabeth McKenzie interrogate the ethical and cultural frameworks of the Melanesian Film Archive. Both of these articles emphasise the important relationships that have developed over time between Australia and our Pacific neighbours.

The issue closes with two articles that consider the places that records are kept – the digital archive in Olle Sköld and Isto Huvila's consideration of archives of the popular movement, and the regional university in Adele Wessell, Clare Thorpe and Monica Casavieja Muniz's reflection article.

The editors thank the Editorial Board and the ASA Council for their ongoing support and advice. We would especially like to thank Peta Jane Blessing for her time and work on the Editorial Board. If you would like to nominate for the Editorial Board, please contact [journaleditor@archivists.org.au](mailto:journaleditor@archivists.org.au). As always, we welcome both peer-reviewed and reflection articles for the journal – if you would like to discuss a submission, please get in touch.

Angela Schilling  
Dr Jessie Lymn  
General Editors



## ARTICLE

Mela Mijimit, Dalimbat Mela Stori (We Together, We Telling Our Story)<sup>1</sup>: 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 exchange 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.*<sup>2</sup>

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 inter-generationally 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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

‘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 ...<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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:

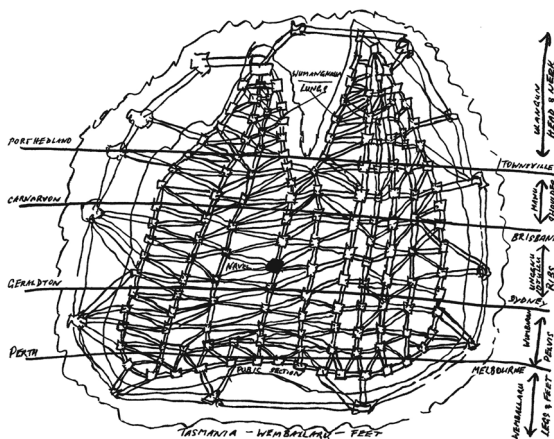
*... [with art,] you can talk about all of those hard subjects that people don’t like to talk about, whatever that might be. It could be genocide. It could be deaths in custody...It’s happened all over the place. But through art...it’s just a different way you can approach things and make things look 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 ...<sup>14</sup>*

### *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)<sup>15</sup>; 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.<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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,<sup>19</sup> ... 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.<sup>20</sup>*

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.<sup>21</sup>

#### *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,<sup>22</sup> 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 *unlearn*,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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,<sup>25</sup> 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...*<sup>26</sup>

The Mount Holyoke cloak, completed prior to the Newcastle / Ngukurr cloak, challenged the idea of archives as things held elsewhere from their origins.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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...<sup>29</sup>*

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,<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>*

### 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,<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>



**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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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).<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> Dexter's trips south cemented relationships and consolidated connections and exchanges between the north and south, while emphasising Aboriginal peoples' fight for their Country.<sup>39</sup>

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,<sup>40</sup> 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<sup>41</sup>; 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.<sup>42</sup> The Ngukurr flowers are strikingly similar to those made by Aboriginal women in southeast Australia (from the 1920s onwards),<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> Feathers are also functional, for instance, as additional fibre to give twine a fluffy texture.<sup>46</sup> Many birds were and are important food sources; the supply of feathers has long been a reliable by-product of subsistence.<sup>47</sup> 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).<sup>48</sup> In other words, Indigenous knowledge is dynamic, and transformations in design and the use of material culture have



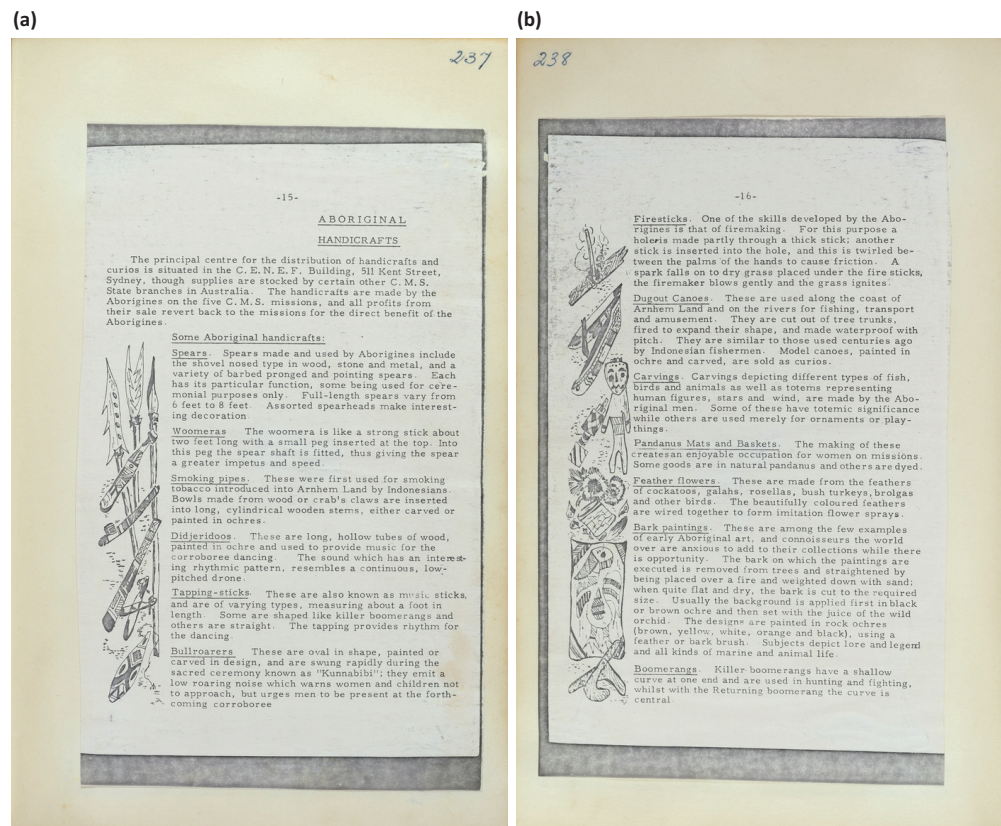
**Figure 7.** Feather flowers. Museum Melbourne, 2021. Photo Fran Edmonds.

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).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>; as a result, up to nine clan groups were brought together.<sup>51</sup> 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 agentic, 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!'<sup>52</sup>

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]<sup>53</sup>...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].<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>*

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.<sup>56</sup>

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).<sup>57</sup> 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.

*[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.<sup>58</sup>*

*[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?<sup>59</sup>*

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...<sup>60</sup>*

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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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).<sup>63</sup> 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?<sup>64</sup>*

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].<sup>65</sup> [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.<sup>66</sup> 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, ...<sup>67</sup>*

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...<sup>68</sup>*

#### **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'.<sup>69</sup>

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.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup>*

#### **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.<sup>72</sup> 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,<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup>*

Storytelling is an expression of knowledge exchange.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup>*

The cloak formed a kind of a canvas for thinking about how cultural knowledge, when re-animated 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.<sup>77</sup>*



**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:Yarlun (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.<sup>78</sup> 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 yarlun, 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).<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup>

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.<sup>82</sup> 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,<sup>83</sup> 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<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup>*

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.<sup>86</sup>

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.<sup>87</sup> 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’.<sup>88</sup>

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.<sup>89</sup>*

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,<sup>90</sup> 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.<sup>91</sup>

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.<sup>92</sup> 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.

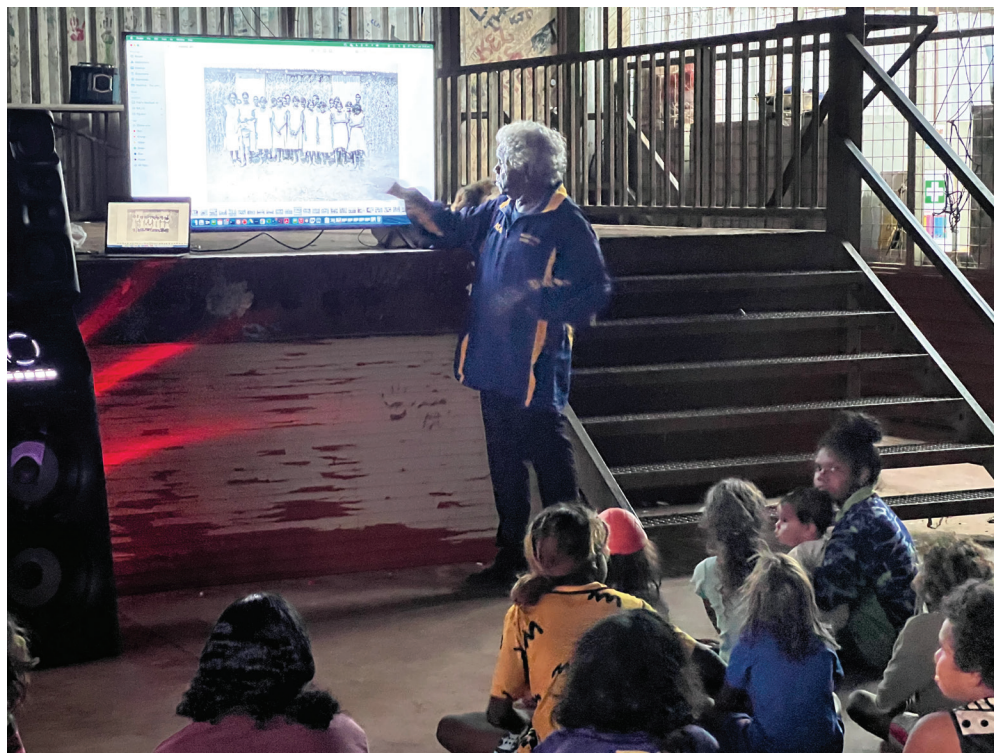
#### *Governance and community control*

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.<sup>93</sup> This meant that the only viable option to ‘return’ the archive to community was via an external hard drive, connected to a laptop.<sup>94</sup> 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,<sup>95</sup> 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’.<sup>96</sup> 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.<sup>97</sup>

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*



**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'.<sup>98</sup>*

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.<sup>99</sup> 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.<sup>100</sup>

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.<sup>101</sup>*

## 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...'<sup>102</sup>*

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 ...'<sup>103</sup>*

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]...*<sup>104</sup>

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.*<sup>105</sup>

#### **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.

*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.<sup>106</sup>*

Making, together, has been a central through line of all of our work; this is the LA.<sup>107</sup> 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.<sup>108</sup>*

### Acknowledgements

Australian Research Council Indigenous Discovery Project (ARC INDP 200100042) 'Indigenous Storytelling and the Living Archive of Aboriginal Knowledge' 2020–2024, led by Associate Professor Jeanine Leane (Wiradjuri).

Climate Research Accelerator (CRX), Melbourne Climate Futures grant, University of Melbourne 2023.

NAIS/Mellon 'Gathering at the Crossroads' mini-grant and artists' residency (Five Colleges, Inc. USA), 2022.

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 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.), *ngarree // 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, Rembarnga, Wubuy (Nungubuyyu), Wägilak, and Ritharrŋu) are now endangered, and the main language spoken in the community today is Kriol. For more information, see <https://ngukurr.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](http://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 Baiya (Singing the Possum): Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge in the Academy', in Frances Edmonds, Sabra Thorner, and Maree Clarke (eds.), *ngagee // 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 Xiem, 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.dcccew.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/](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 Pakeri 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.



## ARTICLE

## Unlocking the Archive: Cultural and Ethical Considerations Surrounding the Future of the Melanesian Film Archive

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**Abstract**

The Melanesian Film Archive (MFA) is an extensive collection of medical and anthropological films. Medical films in the archive principally concern the work of Dr D. Carleton Gajdusek, Michael P. Alpers and others related to the aetiology of kuru, a neurodegenerative disease. The Archives' anthropological collection comprises 513 research documentary films, mostly shot in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the 1960s, but also in Melanesia, the Pacific region and elsewhere; anthropological records are supplemented by reel-to-reel audiotapes. This paper considers access and sharing complexities caused by recent preservation activities, including digitisation of these fragile and important films and associated documentation to preserve them for future researchers. Digitisation and possible digital repatriation of this material raise important cultural, legal and ethical considerations that must be addressed, including MFA data governance needs and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights, access and sharing.

**Keywords:** *Audiotapes; Digitisation; Digital repatriation; Films; Indigenous; Kuru; Papua New Guinea.*

**Melanesian Film Archive**

Held at Curtin University in Western Australia, the MFA began as a film collection compiled by Dr D. Carleton Gajdusek of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, United States of America (USA).<sup>1</sup>

The collection was put into temporary storage following Gajdusek's departure from the NIH. Gajdusek requested that the collection be sent to Curtin University and placed under the care of Michael P. Alpers (MPA). The university agreed to create a facility to keep the original films under strict temperature and humidity control, and they were shipped from the USA to Curtin in 2005. Medical and ethnographic films and other

1. Curtin University, Melanesian Film Archive, 2023, available at <https://www.curtin.edu.au/archives/melanesian-film-archive/>, accessed 30 August 2023.

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records of indigenous peoples' lives and communities in PNG, Melanesia and elsewhere cover the years from 1926 to 1980.

Although Curtin University has held the Archive since 2005, digitisation work began only in 2021, shortly after the Digitisation Centre of Western Australia (DCWA) was commissioned.<sup>2</sup> Curtin Information Management and Archives staff work with MPA, the Archive's principal custodian and curator, to manage the collection and plan its future. As well as exploring how the University manages access to, and use of, the archive as digitisation of the 16 mm films proceeds, this includes how we engage with people from the indigenous cultures represented in the films about the ownership and repatriation of digitised material.

This work has brought to the fore issues surrounding the appropriate use and sharing of the Archive by establishing and maintaining data governance frameworks and has raised significant questions about the ownership and repatriation of archival material.

The MFA contains 513 catalogued films made by various creators. While the collection began with medical films about kuru, a neurodegenerative disease highly prevalent in the remote Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), it later included material from other disciplines such as anthropology and paediatric behaviour in indigenous people.

The Archive includes historically important films, including those taken on Matthew Stirling's expedition to West Papua in 1926, Beatrice Blackwood's films of the Änga (then called the Kukukuku) from PNG in 1937 and Margaret Mead's films from Manus Island in 1953. The collection's films are of great interest and importance to researchers, not only because of their cultural, scientific and heritage value, but also because of the methodology used to design and produce the films, form the Archive, arrange for film deposits and manage and preserve the films as records. While some of these films may be copies or master versions with copies held elsewhere, this film Archive was purposely created to provide a cohesive and interrelated record of these indigenous peoples through the lens of scientists and scholars.

Along with the workprints, sound reels, videotapes, photographs, slides, negatives, documents, books, reports and journals forming the Kuru Clinical Archives, the MFA contains a film editing table and sound playback equipment, and patient records, correspondence and research notes by contributing scientists, all of which were organised by the curator.

One of this paper's main purposes is to consider how to ensure that the Archive remains intact in its current physical form, and how, once digitised, its value to the academy (in terms of research into the sciences, social sciences and humanities) as well as to the indigenous communities in PNG and elsewhere whose stories are contained within it can be maximised while ensuring that ethical and legal frameworks are upheld.

Apart from considering how to ensure that the Archive's current physical form remains intact, this paper also investigates how to maximise the collection's value, once its constituent elements are digitised, to the academy (in terms of research) and to the people of the indigenous communities in PNG and elsewhere whose stories are told within it while upholding ethical and legal frameworks.

### **Setting the scene: finding the cause of kuru**

In 1957, Dr Carleton Gajdusek arrived in Okapa in the Eastern Highlands of PNG, where kuru had become widespread among the Fore people and neighbouring peoples with whom they intermarried. Gajdusek and his team, soon to include Alpers, began

2. DCWA, which aims to ensure the archival-standard digitisation of cultural materials significant to Western Australia and the world, was established with funding from the Australian Research Council. This funding was won by the joint efforts of the Associate Deans Research Network (a collective of the humanities, arts and social sciences faculties of all Western Australian universities), the State Library of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum.

using film to document this disease, its geographic boundaries and its effects on people suffering from it.<sup>3</sup> The Fore called the disease ‘kuru’, which means trembling or shaking, reflecting its symptomology of uncontrollable tremors, muscular incoordination, inability to walk, emotional lability and behaviour changes. After the onset of symptoms, which were mild initially, the disease progressed inevitably to death around 12 months later.

Gajdusek and his colleagues discovered that kuru was transmissible, with the mode of transmission linked to the Fore mortuary practice of transumption of the bodies of dead loved ones (Gajdusek et al., 1966; Alpers, 2007; Whitfield et al., 2015). Women and children were the main participants in this practice and comprised majority of the disease victims (Whitfield et al., 2008). A transmissible agent – later shown to be an infectious, self-propagating protein called a prion – was identified as the cause of kuru. Gajdusek’s and his colleagues’ findings caused a breakthrough in worldwide research into other perplexing neurodegenerative diseases (including dementia), which are now, along with kuru, collectively known as prion diseases. The practice of transumption was banned by PNG’s colonial administration in the 1950s, leading to a gradual decline in deaths from kuru and the disruption and social change caused by the loss of family and community members. The epidemic, which was causing 200 deaths a year when first investigated, eventually ended in 2009, with the last kuru sufferer dying after a disease incubation period of 50 or more years.

Gajdusek’s and his colleagues’ work immeasurably benefited humankind by informing investigation into many aspects of these prion diseases and neurotoxicity, as well as the role genetics plays in the disease processes. The Archive’s films are both epidemiological and ethnographic in nature, but describing them in these terms does not do justice to the astounding richness and depth of the cultural and social imagery recorded, which includes scenes of daily life in a village – making salt, dressing a pig for eating, gardens being worked, children playing and learning to walk and celebrations of life such as weddings, rituals and dancing; and food preparation – and footage of medical conditions rarely seen today in the Western world (e.g., goitre, cretinism, yaws), and of magnificent rivers, panoramic vistas, aerial views of landscapes and more. As MPA explains regarding the development of the collection:

It initially contained film taken by Carleton, and then by E. Richard Sorenson ... and then by me when I came to the National Institutes of Health in 1964. It took a while before we had a separate unit with staff and equipment dedicated to the film and the still photographic collection. We had a collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, where Sorenson eventually went to work, and through that connection obtained copies of films by Margaret Mead, for example. Other people donated their films to the collection. Others ... obtained their film stock and its processing from the NIH, and perhaps received other support, and deposited their completed films with their documentation in the NIH collection. (M.P. Alpers, personal communication, May 2022).

3. In the mid-1960s, Gajdusek, whose areas of study included paediatric behaviour in what were then considered ‘primitive’ societies, and E. R. Sorenson, who studied child behaviour in primitive societies and human development, agreed to build a cohesive collection of films dealing with these subjects, which led to the creation of what would eventually become known as the Melanesian Film Archive. They explained the decision as follows:

In addition to the Research Films taken as part of our own studies, we have searched extensively throughout the world to locate films taken by other investigators interested in primitive man [sic]. ... We have encouraged such workers to deposit their original uncut footage in the Archive and to work it into the Research Film Format. (Sorenson & Gajdusek, 1966, p. 190)

### **An enduring record**

Gajdusek and Sorenson developed rules and protocols for managing and reusing research and documentary film footage. Their article dealing with the rationale for creating this collection includes a descriptive listing of films deposited following those rules and protocols (Sorenson & Gajdusek, 1966). Their production and research processes were designed to preserve a master of each film (uncut and unedited) to ensure a complete and authentic record of the event filmed was always retained. Workprints were made available as needed for the preparation of 'research', 'special' and 'demonstration' films. The original films and master copies were despatched to the cold room, while the copied films were held ready for showing with the workprints going into the Film Unit's storage space.<sup>4</sup>

The evidence of multiple creators and cross-jurisdictional content in the Archive provides Curtin University with complex choices when dealing with the consequences and potentials of digitisation.<sup>5</sup> The film Archive's provenance is complicated because the MFA has developed its own meaning over time. Each film is a record, but information about it is also a record, while the entire Archive is a record of a scientific and creative research project. Multiple provenance arcs must be considered, not least of which is the source of each film's content – the clans, tribes, communities and linguistic groups of PNG as well as the people of the other nations represented in the Archive's records. As MPA clearly explains, '[m]ost of the activities on these films can no longer be found, so they form a cultural record of human beings that is irreplaceable' (M.P. Alpers, personal communication, 2022).

Understanding the MFA as a multifaceted and interconnected set of records assists the collection owner and custodians in mapping a future for the Archive. The films are not only a trove of medical and ethnographic data, but also a record of family memory and individual lives. At a collective level, they are a record of community and national memory and identity from 1926 to 1980. Except for the Fore community, with which MPA maintains close contact, documented communities may be unaware of the existence of these films and what they record. They may also be unaware of the efforts being invested in preserving and managing the Archive for the future.

### **The changing responsibilities of collection owners/holders**

In essence, we know that the cultural and traditional information and personal lives of the Fore people and others represented in the Archive were documented by film and sound and taken elsewhere for examination by researchers and scholars interested in anthropology and medicine. This was to ensure the films and their sound data would be useful in many areas of study, but this did not happen because the Archive was locked away. However, digitisation of the Archive means we can now explore how we can make its contents accessible for both researchers and source communities. In the context of wide-ranging discussions about Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and traditional cultural expression and ethics, we as the Archive's custodians have a changed and complex responsibility.

Among the questions we must consider are: How did the MFA films come about? Was consent sought from the communities filmed? Did these communities understand the function and role of the films being made? Have the recorded subjects or their descendants been

4. Access to the films is by a five-volume catalogue – the Central Nervous System Studies Laboratory (CNSSL) catalogue – that organises and indexes most of the films by creator details, ethnographic location and film type. Many films have detailed technical descriptions, summaries and explanations, and each series usually has a detailed statement about that series and each film.

5. As we examine each MFA record series, it is becoming evident that some films have surrogates elsewhere. It may be difficult to determine whether some of the films in the Archive are copies or masters. Curtin University will look for future opportunities to discuss these possibilities with other archives. This situation is not unique to the MFA (see, e.g. Sassoon et al., 2023).

informed that these records exist and what they contain? Whose rights and responsibilities are being protected in the preservation of the Archive as a whole? Importantly, how can the communities represented in these records make informed choices and decisions about what can be done with them for future generations, given the films depict past medical conditions and aspects of social, cultural and ritual practices?

We continue to reflect on these important questions as we consider and prepare for the future of the MFA. As joint custodians of the Archive, Curtin University and the PNG Institute of Medical Research have signed a deed acknowledging the moral rights of the people whose images were filmed, giving the University the right to digitise the films for preservation purposes, to facilitate access to them and their use for research and scholarly purposes. While digitisation continues the long chain of effort to preserve the MFA, it has also created an archive that will ultimately have two realities: first, the physical and fixed location of the Archive at Curtin University, where the format of the films is a barrier to research use and where there are mature and appropriate governance principles and strict protocols for access and protection from inappropriate use; and, second, the digital copy, which offers the potential for multiple audiences, access points and uses, and – where its use becomes fluid and dynamic as technology advances – to synchronise with the university's digital capability. While both realities have important associated ethical questions, the concerns of the second are amplified by digitisation and the use of digital technologies. As LeClere (2018, p. 290) makes clear:

Digital archives may seem like an equitable quick fix, but like their physical counterparts they still ask marginalised groups for the highest contribution to these projects – because while digital archives create more democratic access, they also create more opportunities for the private and/or sensitive information within archives to be disseminated widely, and often without consent.

We are examining how these concerns can be mitigated by an access and engagement framework to protect and share the Archives and its contents, and by acting with empathy and respect for its creators and subjects.

While recognising the significance of these films, we also acknowledge that they were made in an era when the research landscape was different from that of today. Ethics approvals were generally neither sought nor were they always part of the process involved in forming what are now common activities in any tertiary institution – writing research proposals, seeking required funding and obtaining ethical clearances and approvals.

One of Curtin University's most pressing concerns is how access to the digital iteration of the MFA will be managed. This will pivot around building a more complete understanding of the context, origins and content of the Archive, the people whose personal and collective histories are held within it and the intentions of its creators by having a clear sense of how they communicated what they were doing to the people depicted in the films. Informing the descendants of the subjects of the films about their existence and providing them with accurate information about what they depict will necessitate a new direction for the Archive. When considering how to develop these protocols, it is germane to draw on the Indigenous Archive Collective of Australia, which provides guidance and frameworks on the right of reply and the right to know in relation to the depiction of people in filmic works in Australia. The Collective (2021, p. 246) states:

the *Right of Reply* can provide alternative versions and descriptive frameworks which sit alongside, rather than replace, the organisational interpretation of records. In a fully implemented participant model, every contributor, including the person whom the record

is about, has legal and moral rights and responsibilities in relation to ownership, access and privacy.

This framework is useful for Curtin when considering how best to share the materials held within the digitised archive while also protecting and respecting the rights of the communities and individuals depicted in the films. These responsibilities must be shared between the curator and other custodians, the archivists and the University itself. At a summit held at the National Library of Australia in 2019, the Tandanya – Adelaide Declaration was presented to David Fricker, then Director-General of the National Archives of Australia and President of the International Council on Archives (ICA). The declaration states that archivists have a:

responsibility to re-imagine the meaning of archives as an engaging model of social memory; to embrace the Indigenous worldviews and methods of creating, sharing and preserving valued knowledge. To decolonise our archival principles with Indigenous knowledge methods, to open the meaning of public archives to Indigenous interpretations ... the remodelling of traditional archival principles. (ICA, 2019, p. 2)

However, because the MFA is not a public archive, there are constraints in how it might be shared, and we must weigh access requests against a range of considerations.

To ensure transparency in how we consider access and use requests, Curtin established an internal committee to review requests and ensure alignment with the University's deed with the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research; compliance with privacy, copyright and archival (Australian) laws; ethic frameworks and how engagement has occurred (or will occur) with the descendants and kin of individuals or communities depicted in the films or their representatives. A consideration is whether participating source communities know these films exist before they are used, and that, second, we understand the films' context, which is critical to determining their future. We know this will impose barriers for researchers as we navigate how to provide appropriate (digital) access. Bingo (2011, p. 521) argues that access to archival records should not be subject to hard-and-fast boundaries, but should come down to the exercise of judgment using identified standardised criteria and tools:

Ultimately, contextual integrity provides an example of a structured means to evaluate privacy risk, one that can be applied to different functions, from appraisal to access. If, as [Sara] Hodson argues, archivists bear an ethical responsibility to protect the privacy of third parties, a set of standard criteria or tools can help assure both archivists and donors that a certain level of rigor is applied to privacy questions. Because privacy will always be subject to the archivist's judgment, our goal should not be the creation of hard and fast boundaries, but rather the identification of tools that will help evaluate risk and provide confidence that reasonable steps are taken to protect privacy.

The process of digitising the MFA has highlighted the nuance and specificity of the tools available to carry out that risk evaluation. What guidance can we utilise to do this? The Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA) has a range of principles to inform the ethical management and dissemination of indigenous data, and has championed the adoption of the Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility and Ethics (CARE) Principles for Indigenous Data Governance:

The current movement toward open data and open science does not fully engage with Indigenous Peoples rights and interests. Existing principles within the open data movement (e.g. FAIR: findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) primarily focus on characteristics of

data that will facilitate increased data sharing among entities while ignoring power differentials and historical contexts. The emphasis on greater data sharing alone creates a tension for Indigenous Peoples who are also asserting greater control over the application and use of Indigenous data and Indigenous Knowledge for collective benefit. (GIDA, 2019, p. 1)

As this makes clear, it is crucial that indigenous peoples are involved in decision-making about any future use of an archive relating to their lives and cultures.

As its custodians and archivists, we are determined to ensure that when the MFA is available in its digital form, we follow appropriate and culturally sensitive protocols, maintain its integrity as an archive and protect its records for future generations (Thorpe & Brooker, 2022, p. 442). We are also informed by the work of Terri Janke, who established and championed ICIP rights in Australia and developed a framework and protocol that are gradually being adopted by organisations and institutions nationally.<sup>6</sup>

Thorpe and Brooker (2022) point out that many Australian arts organisations have developed guidelines to work with indigenous peoples and to understand ICIP rights, particularly those relating to the reproduction and use of indigenous cultural heritage materials.<sup>7</sup> These frameworks provide guidance on the key ethical and cultural considerations that must be adhered to when considering future digital repatriation of this valuable cultural heritage material.

### **The question of repatriation**

Applying the principles and frameworks outlined earlier in the text to the future digital management of this Archive includes considering research on, and key arguments about, decolonisation and repatriation of archival records. These specific matters will need to be addressed by Curtin University, its archivist and the MFA curator.

Apart from considering the rights of the communities involved, Curtin is responsible for the protection of, and access to, important historical, cultural, spiritual and medical information contained within the Archive and the future of the Archive itself. Important questions to be considered include: Who should have access? What restrictions should be placed on this? Is digital repatriation currently possible, or advisable? What do we mean by digital repatriation? What form should this take? Who should make these decisions? These and other key questions require detailed and careful consideration before any action can take place.

While an access review process has been established at the University, in the longer term it will be necessary to consider even more complicated questions when the entire Archive is digitised. As Bell et al. (2013, p. 196) make clear:

Digital repatriation can be a contentious term that generates reflex assumptions about the relationship between digital and material forms of cultural heritage materials. While it may be tempting to assume, at first glance, that the digital object – as a surrogate – somehow

6. ICIP protocols ensure indigenous peoples have the rights to own and control their cultural heritage; within Australia, this includes traditional knowledge (scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge, ritual knowledge); traditional cultural expression (stories, designs and symbols, literature and language); performances (ceremonies, dance and song); cultural objects (including, but not limited to arts, crafts, ceramics, jewellery, weapons, tools, visual arts, photographs, textiles, contemporary art practices); human remains and tissues; secret and sacred material and information (including sacred/historically significant sites and burial grounds); and documentation of indigenous peoples' heritage in all forms of media such as films, photographs, artistic works, books, reports and records taken by others, sound recordings and digital databases (Australian Council for the Arts, 2019).

7. Thorpe and Brooker provide an extensive overview of the issues facing libraries and the sector more broadly in matters of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property, at the heart of which is that 'Library and information workers will need to examine their collections with respect and understanding and be willing to challenge past collecting practices that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of agency and self-determination' (Thorpe & Brooker, 2022, p. 442).

replaces the physical object, no standard definition, nor agreed-upon terminology, characterizes the multiple practices of collecting institutions, individuals, or local community groups surrounding the return of cultural and historical materials to indigenous communities in a digital form.

To ensure community members' moral rights are protected, engagement and understanding will need to be developed collaboratively with community leaders, particularly in PNG, before any material is repatriated digitally. Digitised copies should be returned in a way that provides the relevant participants (both PNG communities and relevant researchers) with historical information and archival details about the films. Some films could be distressing or may contain ceremonial events and activities intended for viewing only by some members of a community. Careful planning, study and discussion must occur so that the social, cultural and personal needs of the relevant PNG communities in PNG are considered. Discussions with PNG national and regional museums and libraries and the PNG Office of Libraries and Archives will be key to this.

### **Technical considerations**

Digital repatriation of this material to PNG raises challenging technical considerations and questions. It would be unwise to return material without an institution or community centre ready to manage the films, provide curation, apply consistent and equitable access to it for the community and develop appropriate criteria for its external use.

Technological advances mean that options to ameliorate some of these issues are increasingly available. One question that must be addressed is whether the Archive needs to be physically in situ in a local community or whether the digital objects might be held offshore. If this were to happen, we would need to ensure the community has appropriate access to, and oversight of, these objects while the physical objects would remain held in and be administered (in terms of preserving the physical films and other records) by Curtin University.

To determine this matter, detailed discussions need to take place along with careful benchmarking against similar collections held in other locations throughout the world. For example, the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) works across several Pacific Ocean cultures with the aim of preserving filmic records by reformatting and encouraging deposit of video and sound recordings. PARADISEC, now in its 20th year, is a consortium of Sydney University, the Australian National University and the University of Melbourne that promotes cultural preservation by providing data backup and preservation services to cultural agencies in the Pacific region and access to recordings in over 700 collections through an online catalogue. Access conditions vary collection by collection.

It is evident that we will need appropriate protocols and guidelines before the MFA material is repatriated – PARADISEC's work is appropriate to examine in this regard.

### **In conclusion ... for now**

MPA (personal communication, 2022) has stated that 'one of the important ethical principles to keep in mind is how unethical it would be not to make these films available to the world'. While this is a key point, we note that context matters for discussion of both digital and physical repatriation. In this case we believe the current collection owner and custodians are ethically responsible for sharing the material both with the world and with the materials' communities of origin. However, they must do so with respect, care and appropriate framing.

There is no desire to prevent access, but there is a strong desire to ensure that access benefits those who gain it (researchers, communities and individuals) and that the material is used to enrich lives. As Were (2014, p. 155) points out:

One of the defining features of digital heritage is that the technology facilitates a new kind of knowing by embracing an analytical understanding of objects through imaging tools and the sharing of knowledge that augments real-life engagement with material culture. Digital heritage allows for a new coming together or completeness (Rowlands 2004) by foregrounding the dispersal of cultural objects that once existed in one particular time and place, leading to the reinvigoration of dissipated identities and cultural loss through relocation and restitution.

While this sounds admirable and aspirational, we must resolve many complicated matters before this specific digital archive is given the opportunity to facilitate the ‘reinvigoration of dissipated identities’ – if indeed this is the case in relation to the communities of the Eastern Highlands of PNG.

As MPA (personal communication, 2022) further observed:

We need to develop an increased sense of trust with communities without causing unrest. We need to move ahead in parallel ways, so that, for example, films can be accessed and used before all aspects and aspirations have been achieved.

A good example of this is the use of MFA archival footage in the Bygott and Alpers kuru documentary (2010). The directors strictly followed the rules established by the MFA curator as interim guidelines. Their proposal for the film was approved in advance by the Medical Research Advisory Committee of Papua New Guinea. Once the new film had been shot and edited and the archival footage added, the rough cut of the documentary was shown to a group of male and female elders from the Fore and a neighbouring group for their approval. This approval was obtained, ensuring acceptance by the community of the use of the archival footage and of the full content of the documentary, and the film went into production for showing on television. A notable feature of this documentary is that it gives a voice to the Fore, otherwise rarely heard, about the disease that affected them so grimly.

It is important to keep in mind that along with the possibility of doing harm, there is also the possibility of the digital material acting as a catalyst for cultural enrichment and transformation, as outlined by Bell et al. (2013, p. 196):

Digital surrogates are not always intended to replace, or be synonymous with, the physical materials that they may represent. Instead, digital (or digitized) cultural materials may also provide an alternative form of – and dynamic life for – certain physical objects. Such newly digitized and repatriated materials may be the impetus for linguistic or cultural revival, spur contention and disagreement, prompt new cultural forms or popular products, incite new collaborations, and engender new types of performances and artistic creations.

The expressed purposes and moral viewpoints of those who took part in making the films must also be given consideration and, arguably, a high priority. Often these will not be known and, if they are, may possibly conflict with contemporary community views – for instance, in many cases the determination of what can be revealed of sacred rites fluctuates over time and varies within communities. One example of a strong intended purpose expressed by an original participant film may be found within the MFA: Puwa was the salt-maker of his village

and the only person skilled in the sophisticated technology of making salt from potash. Now deceased, in the 1960s he was the joint initiator of his film because he wanted to demonstrate to his descendants that he and his contemporaries, who had just ceased living in a fully traditional culture, were not primitive people, something he articulated firmly to MPA (personal communication, 2022). To fulfil his purpose and respect his voice, Puwa's film is being made.

This clearly shows that the custodians at Curtin University must view the MFA's future accessibility from a range of perspectives. The MFA's holdings have the potential to reach a range of academic disciplines – including medical, anthropological, sociological, cultural, artistic and historical fields – and MFA stewardship must be supported in an integrated and comprehensive legal, technical and data management system. As MPA (personal communication, 2022) reminds us, 'Curtin University will need to make some firm decisions about how this archive can be shared with the rest of the world as well as of course being properly preserved'.

The University must build an enduring dialogue and a trust-based relationship with the creators of the films and the descendants and/or representatives of the people who were the subjects of the films. The different goals and objectives of these groups in engaging with the material, from reconnecting with their heritage, cultural practices and ritual to undertaking research through the Archive, must be understood and respected. The focus must be human-centred and empathic: the custodians and archivists should be prepared to learn the stories of those involved to improve the practices of custodianship relating to the MFA. This will be a continuing journey for this Archive, one that will intersect with questions about repatriation, ICIP, ethics and responsibility and respectful engagement.

#### **Notes on contributor**

Professor **Michael Alpers** AO, CSM, FRS, FAA and John Curtin Distinguished Professor of International Health at Curtin University, was an Australian medical researcher whose contribution to science and medicine improved public health outcomes for people around the world. His most known work was on the prion disease, kuru. He was also Director of the Papua Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) for 23 years, developing research programs of practical significance to Papua New Guinea, many of which continue today. Ever the humanitarian and scholar and a friend to us all, he passed away on 3rd December 2024

**Susanna Castleden** is Director of the John Curtin Gallery at Curtin University. As an artist and academic Susanna passionately advocates for the recognition of humanities research, its diverse methodologies and approaches, and champions the important role the creative arts contribute to society.

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**Editorial note:** The General Editors note that this article unintentionally uses a referencing style other than the *Archives and Manuscripts* house style. Please accept our apologies for this conflict with the journal style.

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## ARTICLE

# The Importance of Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Phyllis Mander-Jones, Australian-Pacific Historians, and the Australian Joint Copying Project, 1954–1966

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the development of a surrogate (copied) archival collection, the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP). In the 1950s and 1960s, the AJCP was created as a research collection after the Second World War, specifically for researchers in Australia, New Zealand Aotearoa, and the Pacific Islands. As a social historian, I identify and analyse the collaborative relationships between the AJCP curator, Phyllis Mander-Jones, and Australian-based Pacific historians, to show how historiographical changes influenced the curation of this collection. Focusing on the AJCP as a case study illustrates the fact that the formation of a global network of librarians, archivists, and historians made the AJCP possible. Understanding the formation of the AJCP is particularly prescient now as the collection has been digitised, and present-day archival theorists and researchers are increasingly focused on the best practices for record reclassification and contextualisation.

**Keywords:** *Historians; Research collections; Surrogate collections; Social history; Library*

The creation of the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP) on microfilm from 1948 to 1997 enabled the re-distribution of records to researchers based in Australia, the Pacific Islands, and New Zealand Aotearoa.<sup>1</sup> In 1948, AJCP Officers appointed by the Public Library of New South Wales (NSW) and the National Library of Australia (NLA) planned to gather and copy Australian government and colonial records created during the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>2</sup> This became the Public Records Office of London Series (PRO-Series).<sup>3</sup> To ensure that a comprehensive and far-ranging research collection was accessible to Australian researchers, AJCP Officers also copied manuscripts from libraries, galleries, museums, public organisations, and private collections across the British Isles; this the NLA named the Miscellaneous Series (M-Series).<sup>4</sup> When the last microfilm reel was received in 1997, the AJCP contained 10,419 reels.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, a modernisation fund supported the digitisation of the AJCP. This facilitated improved access for those with an internet connection, creating more than 8,000 digital pages.<sup>6</sup> By 2020, the NLA had digitised ‘the world’s most extensive collaborative

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copying project'.<sup>7</sup> In settler-colonial societies like Australia, New Zealand, America, and Canada, surrogate records like the AJCP were an important means for government, institution, community and, in some instances, personal records, to be distributed to audiences unimagined at the time of creation.

As an Australian-Pacific historian concerned with locating evidence of gendered and intercultural encounters in archives, I find surrogate archives (records that are copies of original manuscripts and other important documents) crucial to my professional conversations and research development. The position of being an Australian-based historian specialising in Pacific studies led me to engage extensively with the AJCP for a doctorate. My primary focus was examining the AJCP M-Series London Missionary Society (LMS) records.

As I worked on this collection of evangelical records, I became fascinated with the story behind this archive. The anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler demonstrated that a collection's provenance records and metadata are used to give authority and efficiency in the archives, and can be used to examine a collection's biography.<sup>8</sup> This trend of collection curiosity was exhibited by another social historian, Alexandra Walsham, who, after examining the social history of an archive, asserted that 'archival cultures are historically specific and contingent'.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, this article reveals the biography of the archive to illuminate the relationships that made AJCP M-Series LMS possible. An analysis of documents and correspondence from librarian/archivist Phyllis Mander Jones and the Australian National University (ANU) Pacific Historians of the 1950s and 1960s offers a case study of a global network and collaboration between historians, librarians and archivists. This article supports previous studies that show archivists, record-keepers and librarians who selected records for preservation and access shaped the collection by making decisions about accession or deaccession of materials.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, I show that, from the 1940s to the late 1960s, archivist/librarian Phyllis Mander-Jones supported the creation of surrogate records for Australian researchers, giving them access to unique research collections. Involved with the AJCP, Mander-Jones believed surrogate archival collections allowed Australians to 'be adequately equipped to know our own history'.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging Mander-Jones's involvement with Pacific historians, such as Jim Davidson, Harry Maude and Dorothy Shineberg, reveals the importance of a reciprocal flow of information between historians, librarians, and archivists when building a collection. The collection was created when Pacific History emerged as a new and innovative discipline in Sydney and Canberra. Their involvement located records by evangelical Christians, such as John Williams and George Lawes, and women in the missions, like Jane Chalmers, for copying. I conclude that as a collection curator, Mander-Jones was subject to historiographical trends brought about by the specific demands made by Pacific Historians for records.

### **Why be attentive to the social history of a collection?**

The relationships between historians and record-keeper are diverse. Canadian archival theorist Terry Cook conceptualised archivists as record gatekeepers with the institutional power to grant or deny historians access to a particular record.<sup>12</sup> Australian archivist Michael Pigott has demonstrated that the archivist-historian relationship ranges from being collaborative to being judgmental of one another's protocols.<sup>13</sup> As Walsham has stated, historians and archivists 'operate as "co-creators" of meaning'.<sup>14</sup> These diverse relationships have increased in complexity. Revered Emeritus Professor Jeannette Bastian, with Ben Alexander, has suggested contemporary scholars find themselves increasingly connected in a global society. A place where oral expressions have value, artificially created collections are emerging more often, and landscapes and cultural activities are incorporated into archival analysis.<sup>15</sup> The professional tensions prompted by access requests and record knowledge between archivists

and historians have increased in complexity as collections have diversified with the creation of copies.

Acknowledging interdisciplinary relationships illuminates a collection's social, cultural and political value. Australian historian Melanie Oppenheimer has demonstrated in her discussion of the 'historian activist' that historians are inclined to follow potential leads of evidence from one archive site to another and are excellent informants regarding the contents, location, and condition of collections on a certain topic.<sup>16</sup> However, without a network to discuss these connections, much of this information remains with historians. Historians Tiffany Shellam and Joanna Cruickshank's assessment of the potential of interdisciplinary work around colonial archives shows that scholars tend to work in silos.<sup>17</sup> The lack of connection between scholars in the archive and outside of it limits the development of records for use to only social categories identified at the time of preservation. A recent case-study analysis of decolonial archives and collaborative projects by scholars of indigenous community archives, Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey, demonstrates that supporting historian–archive relationships can have important social gains for marginalised communities, with official recognition of their important records, leading to acknowledgement of their pasts.<sup>18</sup> Employing a reciprocal process for sharing collection knowledge provides historical information for the archivist to understand manuscripts beyond their original contexts.<sup>19</sup> Knowledge sharing about surrogate records like the AJCP is crucial as copied or surrogate collections are often deposited in multiple sites or not in the custody of a particular archivist (or archive) who knows their origins.<sup>20</sup> With an understanding of the history of an archive, historians can be made aware of ethical issues and cultural knowledge that need to be considered before research occurs.

Surrogate collections are more than copies of records; they are unique collections with their own significant social and cultural histories.<sup>21</sup> Understanding an archive's social history provides a framework for addressing issues that arise from the past. These findings are relevant as present-day archival theorists and researchers consider the best practices for record recontextualisation, reclassification, repatriation and community custodianship.<sup>22</sup>

Confronting such issues can be the difference between the continuation of harmful marginalising processes, the consequence of imperial or colonial preference in the archives, and the recognition of a complex past.<sup>23</sup> Researching the past of a surrogate archive is an additional step that can be difficult given the financial and time limitations. Yet it is a worthwhile endeavour as this process reveals surrogate collections' social, cultural, and political histories.

### **The AJCP: A case study of collaborative networks and history–archive relations**

To create the AJCP M-Series collection, a global network of librarians, archivists, and historians shared knowledge. Earlier surveys of overseas archives from the 19th century by Australian librarians such as James Bonwick and Ida Leeson, the latter on behalf of the Public Library of NSW in 1927, had revealed that a significant proportion of Australian relevant archives existed in Europe. Before the AJCP, the research collection that proved crucial to Australian researchers' understanding of the Pacific was the Australiana and Pacific research collections curated by librarians at the Mitchell Library. This specialised branch of the Public Library of NSW was established in 1910 'to concentrate entirely on Australian content'.<sup>24</sup> Its remit was expanded in line with user demands during the second world war.

The invasive events of World War Two in the Pacific Islands prompted Australian researchers to redefine their understanding of the Pacific region. The strategic demands of the Second World War illuminated the fact that Australia needed improved access to information about other nearby Pacific Island societies and environments.<sup>25</sup> As a political and military force associated with the Allies, Australia was an entry point for imperial forces to access

information about other cultures, geography, and politics in the Pacific region.<sup>26</sup> The Allies' ambitions to understand the Pacific Islands' geography and cultures were extensive. Australian libraries involved with the Allied Geographical Section (AGS), like the Mitchell Library, expanded their collections to reflect these research demands. Geoffrey Gray, Doug Munro and Christine Winter's edited volume, *Scholars at War: Australasian Social Scientists, 1939–1945*, explains how anthropologists and others in the social sciences were directed to analyse life and societies on Pacific Islands. To create this collection, knowledge was shared across a transnational 'network of scholars based in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the United States'.<sup>27</sup> These demands for new knowledge merged with new technology and contemporary research practices.

This highly political environment provided Mander-Jones with her foundational training in modern librarianship. It was also a moment when the importance of holding Pacific records was indicated to Australian researchers and collecting institutions. In 1942, prompted by the requirements of war strategists, the Mitchell librarian, Ida Leeson, was asked by the AGS to provide 'all essential facts regarding books, journals, maps, charts' about the area then defined as Australasia.<sup>28</sup> There was a strong understanding of Australia belonging politically, socially, and geographically to 'Australasia'.<sup>29</sup> While recognised now as a problematic concept for its reduction of a range of indigenous societies and communities, Australasia was an important contemporary political concept in the 20th century. Australasia referred to 'the Australian mainland, New Zealand, Tasmania, Fiji and any other British Colonies or possession in Australasia (Papua, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, Tonga)'.<sup>30</sup> The term Australasia was used to describe the network of nations and colonies between Malaysia, Australia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia, now collectively known as Oceania. As a political concept, Australasia gave researchers a framework to locate Australian, New Zealand, and Pacific Islands content. Mander-Jones, supervised by Leeson, 'dug up photos which showed the coastline, descriptions of islands, maps, charts, and books on every aspect of the Pacific'.<sup>31</sup> Her training at the Mitchell involved locating and preserving Pacific records as much as Australian records. This merger of geographical places reinforced the idea that Australia was part of Australasia.

The expansion of Australian research collections benefited from training in new copying technologies. After seeing and learning of the devastation military action had on cultural heritage and records during World War Two, settler colonial states, like Australia, sought to procure copies of official and unofficial records preserved in Europe. The staff of the Commonwealth Library and the State NSW Library recognised that they shared the ambition to acquire Australian-centric manuscripts, they sought to produce a financially efficient microfilmed collection.<sup>32</sup> Initially microfilmed collections were deemed as a solution to the increasing fragility of a record.<sup>33</sup> For librarians like Harold White, Australia's national librarian, microfilms were a core technology by which Australian libraries could construct 'active information systems' – systems that could grow in response to user demands.<sup>34</sup> Microfilm, at this stage, had been used commercially for almost two decades, and it was refined to the point that 'readable copies were produced from microfilm in exactly the same way as for standard photographs'.<sup>35</sup> White visited the Library of Congress in 1939 to understand the important process of copying records. There, he learned that 'microphotography was the key to...building a comprehensive and specialised collection, overcoming its [the Library's] problems of shelving space, and nationally coordinating the creation and exchange of bibliographic information'.<sup>36</sup> Microfilm was an important means of preserving and sharing the past for future researchers.<sup>37</sup> The AJCP Officers were trained in microfilm to copy images of records, artefacts, and ephemera.

From the 1940s to the late 1960s, Mander-Jones advocated that Australian researchers had access to unique archival research collections on microfilm. When the Second World War

officially ended on 2 September 1945, Australia's demands for historical records concerning the Pacific Islands did not cease. Soon after, Mander-Jones was appointed the Mitchell Librarian in 1946, Mander-Jones acquired the 'responsibility for the administration of the [State] archives'.<sup>38</sup> She applied for a grant to attend the British Library, research their archival system, and bring some historical records back to Australia. Due to Australia's political status as a settler nation, many manuscripts, maps, diaries, letters, and paintings relative to Australia's history were situated in the imperial archives of Europe. Using the earlier surveys of Bonwich and Leeson, Mander-Jones identified records in the British Isles at official and private institutions and determined the magnitude of materials that needed to be copied and returned to Australia.<sup>39</sup> This journey was a turning point in Mander-Jones's career as a librarian. Mander-Jones explained the Library 'knew what I was interested in was archives and special library work', but, as she soon found out, the [British] Council could not identify the location of 'sources of Australian history'.<sup>40</sup> Mander-Jones realised that specialised librarians and archivists were needed to create the Australasian historical collections as intended by the NLA and NSW libraries.

This training trip proved a serendipitous training moment for Mander-Jones. A side trip to France ensured that Mander-Jones attended an archives conference where, in Paris, the British archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson was 'the star' presenter.<sup>41</sup> Jenkinson, a foundational scholar of modern archival theory, was a fierce advocate for librarians to act as archivists, while also being advocates for researchers' needs.<sup>42</sup> Based in the imperial space of the British Public Records Office, Jenkinson asserted the importance of establishing principled structured duties, archival authority, storage, and the 'unbroken chain of custody'.<sup>43</sup> Today, his legacy is recognised as an earlier attempt to create a universal, Eurocentric system for record selection, preservation and agreed-upon codification systems.<sup>44</sup> This professional encounter ensured that Mander-Jones understood the importance of provenance and the value of specialised researchers when working on future collections, such as the AJCP M-Series.

As directed in Jenkinson's *A Manual of Archival Administration* (1937), Mander-Jones provided the State and scholars with the required ordered and catalogued records.<sup>45</sup> Jenkinson's approach, realised by a man embedded in the British PRO, was enacted differently in a settler colonial state like Australia. In England, records were created and retained in the nation of record creation. In Australia, reports, letters, and pamphlets were produced and sent outside of the site of creation for preservation in imperial archives or at least kept elsewhere in the British Empire. These well-travelled records needed to be retrieved if historians were to produce local histories. Unlike the British PRO situation, Australian records would have to be re-contextualised for Australian users, showing the unexpected addition in provenance.

As Mander-Jones supported Jenkinson's advocacy for the continuous custody of records to ensure archival quality she also provided the means for scholars to draw on these records to produce Pacific-centric histories. If a document's nature was 'understood and proper custody proved', she wrote, 'the historical scholar can rely on his source with confidence and satisfaction'.<sup>46</sup> As archivist Verne Harris (2002) demonstrated in his discussion of race, power, and social life of public records, it is important to pay attention to such details. Changes in provenance can displace the initially decreed use of a record. As analysis of an imperial state's record-keeping practices is illuminated, these records become an unexpected means to challenge the dominant social memory. Records collected in the imperial centre become evidence of how marginalised groups exhibited agency and interacted with dominant social and cultural forces.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, Mander-Jones came to assert that it was not the sole responsibility of the archivist or librarian to identify items for preservation. Mander-Jones explained it was 'the original research of individual scholars that often gives the impetus to a comprehensive scheme and which must be done even when a general plan exists'.<sup>48</sup> This professional

worldview meant that a network of scholars, including historians, had a particular role to play alongside Mander-Jones in acquiring materials to complete the AJCP M-Series.

This training led Mander-Jones to unofficially assume work on the AJCP in 1948. There were important post-war period communications between White, and C.A. Burmester, who was employed by the national library in London as an AJCP Officer. White wrote to Burmester in 1948 that '[i]n view of the disturbed state of Europe, there are urgent reasons for quickening the rate of copying'.<sup>49</sup> With the belief that the Australian and Pacific records held in Europe were under threat, Australian librarians supported using surrogate records to build unique collections for Australian researchers. It was not just the instance of one nation's history being lost, but many, with the past of Australia and New Zealand intertwined with that of the Pacific Islands, and sharing history with the United Kingdom. A letter from Burmester to White, written on 26 November 1948, indicated that Mander-Jones was directly involved in the AJCP technical and logistical planning phase.<sup>50</sup> With additional financial support from the Carnegie Institute, Mander-Jones had extended her overseas trip to undertake archival training in America.<sup>51</sup> In her words, what was planned to be a 3-month tour 'stretched out a bit'.<sup>52</sup> Then she visited various libraries and research spaces to learn about microfilm preservation. On 3 January 1949, Mander-Jones wrote to Burmester and White, informing them what machinery needed to be purchased by the national and NSW state libraries to ensure the AJCP was a success.<sup>53</sup> This input by Mander-Jones demonstrated not all AJCP decisions were made by those officially appointed to the project. The formation of a global communication network was critical to the success of the AJCP.

A return to the Mitchell Library in early 1951 saw Mander-Jones advocate publicly for the importance of surveying, preserving, and providing access to historical documentary evidence. There she worked to provide research-finding aids and catalogues to library patrons to dispel the notion that the 'Mitchell Library [w]as a 'jealously guarded treasure house where catalogues might not be consulted freely'.<sup>54</sup>

A Royal Historical Australian Society event that dealt with constructing Australian archives required material from other nations as:

There will be parallel records...in England, of voyages of exploration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of contacts between Australia and the outside world, and of the development of trade, missionary enterprise and scientific investigation.<sup>55</sup>

Mander-Jones, likely drawing on Leeson's survey and her own research in the British Isles, explained that these records 'should be found in Spain, Portugal, France, England, Holland and their dependencies'.<sup>56</sup> She asserted to her audience that the importance of a surrogate collection like the AJCP was 'obvious'.<sup>57</sup> Aware of the magnitude of what she was proposing, she told her audience, '[w]e are at the beginning of a long road if we are to be adequately equipped to know our own history'.<sup>58</sup>

Mander-Jones continued the argument for an Australian-specific collection in a three-part series about 'the Sources of Australian History' for the *Wellington Times* (Sydney, NSW).<sup>59</sup> Here, her awareness of the importance of place in relation to historical records for historians is apparent. Mander-Jones emphasised in these articles that there needed to be diversity in primary sources acquired for historians, with the acquisition of pictures, maps, books, newspapers, printed leaflets, advertisements, catalogues, and manuscripts.<sup>60</sup> In 1955, she advocated for records from Australia's early days to be stored in a library 'where they can add to the story of our national life'.<sup>61</sup> The issue was how to define the national agenda for archival acquisitions.

Once Mander-Jones was officially appointed as the London-based AJCP Project Officer in 1960, she set strict research boundaries for this transnationally run research and administrative

team. In her role, she received instructions from Sydney and Canberra libraries about what content to collect for Australian users and, in turn, guided AJCP research staff to locate 'letters of interest from a policy, scientific or historical point of view'.<sup>62</sup> Such content was to be 'filmed unless obvious duplicates or copies of originals existed in Australian libraries'.<sup>63</sup> Occasionally items were not pursued due to access rejections by owners (often family members) or 50-year exclusions for personal letters.<sup>64</sup> In a confidential letter from Mr H.L. White on 10 November 1960 titled 'Miss Mander Jones's Responsibility', it was explained that:

Miss Mander-Jones's responsibility is to make a number of surveys of records not yet microfilmed to indicate the quality and, so far as it is possible, such practical and other considerations as affect the order in the copying programme.<sup>65</sup>

The remit was an echo of her work with the AGS. The AJCP gathered records from 'Australasia, the South Pacific Ocean, Eastern Indian Ocean, Antarctica, Indonesia, Borneo, Philippines and Malaya [sic] from the earliest times'.<sup>66</sup> White explained that officers could adapt the project as they determined. Therefore, the AJCP officers had the autonomy to decide what to copy, without confirmation needed from Canberra or Sydney. They were to keep in mind, however, if it was determined by the Officer, there were records that:

[C]onstitute the general background of colonial administration or of relationship between the United Kingdom and the colonies or dominions, then the copying of the whole series is considered to be more useful than the listing and copying of Australian papers [alone].<sup>67</sup>

The AJCP gave a preferential voice to the more authoritative figures and groups in a collection.<sup>68</sup> This provided evidence of provenance and, thereby authority to the copied project. Combined with the other Jenksonian practice of serving the State or researchers, Mander-Jones was trained to expand the project's remit. This meant including voices that may challenge the dominate imperial history narratives that were so popular at the time.

### **The LMS records and Pacific Historians**

Mander-Jones's professional training, and the directives she received as an AJCP Officer influenced the creation of a unique, Australasian-centric LMS collection within the AJCP M-Series. This framework includes records from the LMS archive that were created by missionaries, teachers, and supporters during the 18–20th centuries. The 118 microfilm reels of LMS records copied for the AJCP make it the most extensive collection in the AJCP M-Series. As a non-government collection, the LMS collection is a mixture of institutional and private papers. The content record AJCP researchers preserved records concerning the activities of LMS members and associates in the Pacific Islands from 1796 to 1906. This timeframe was chosen as it adhered to contemporary copyright legislation in the United Kingdom.

The creation of the AJCP M-Series LMS collation resulted from merging research trip notes and direct collection experiences from 1927 and into the 1960s. During a survey trip in April 1948, Burmester visited the LMS archive at Livingstone House, London. There, he assessed the holdings for possible processing. A year later, Mander-Jones created and then provided an LMS survey list to Australia's national library. She suggested that the LMS manuscripts be copied from British archives. When she wrote to Burmester in June of 1949, Mander-Jones echoed White's directive. She asserted that to successfully copy the LMS records for Australian researchers, AJCP Officers must copy Australian and Pacific materials.<sup>69</sup> Referring to the 1927 archival survey undertaken by Leeson in her letter, Mander-Jones told Burmester and White that they should plan for the AJCP to go beyond the original survey by Leeson and

‘all [records available] should be copied’.<sup>70</sup> Her letter indicated she applied the concept of Australasia as a defining framework to the AJCP. Mander-Jones wrote, ‘I think it is a good idea to carry on with the London Missionary Society Papers’ and the New Zealand content in the British archives should also be copied as the expense could be justified due to ‘the great values of it to students in Australia’.<sup>71</sup> In October 1953, K. Bernie, the second AJCP Officer appointed to the London office, continued the survey work started by Leeson, Burmester, and Mander-Jones. He held formal discussions with the LMS Board of Directors and the librarian archivist, Irene Fletcher, to start the filming of Australasian materials.<sup>72</sup>

Knowledge of the AJCP LMS collection survey spread amongst the Australian researcher grapevine. The lack of content concerning the Australasian past led researchers concerned with the Pacific, such as historians Jim Davidson and Harry Maude, to rely on copied records more than Australian-focused others.<sup>73</sup> The creation of the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPS) at the Australian National University 1948 was a means for researchers to continue learning and promoting the Pacific after the war. The RSPS intended to address Australian foreign policy issues.<sup>74</sup> Almost a decade later, Davidson shared a vision for Pacific-centric history at ANU in his 1954 inaugural lecture. Davidson urged the emerging class of Pacific historians to prefer indigenous voices and scholarship and frame their scholarship through an island-centric approach. As ANU was not in the habit of acquiring ‘microcopies [*sic*] of large manuscript collections’ directly, the AJCP became a means for the Pacific history records to be preserved and accessible for researchers.<sup>75</sup>

The first run of LMS microfilm occurred the year after Davidson gave a lecture about the new directions taken by Pacific History in 1955. Davidson and Maude were determined to find and curate Pacific historical records.<sup>76</sup> Davidson’s lecture offered a geographical scope for the AJCP surveys and microfilming, including the Pacific Islands with the potential to expand into East Asia.<sup>77</sup> In her general report for 1961–1962, AJCP, Mander-Jones explained that this scope was formalised in a new agreement made in 1958.<sup>78</sup> This agreement expanded the project’s scope and alluded to the ideas shared by Davidson in the inaugural Pacific History lecture.<sup>79</sup> Then, Davidson addressed the problematic issue of historical records. He asserted the poor condition of Pacific records on the islands, the lack with records being kept in the metropole combined with poor record keeping, was:

[N]ow beginning to worry governments as well as historians: and the time seems propitious for a combined attempt by all who are interested, from the point of view of either administration or research, to put records in the islands into proper order before further losses occur.<sup>80</sup>

It was this new disciplinary focus and intention that ensured that Pacific historians became activists in the archive. They frequently reminded White and Mander-Jones of the extensive Pacific records in the archives of the missionary societies that would be suitable for copying.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, shifts in Australian historiography began to influence the AJCP scope of acquisition.

This advocacy for expansion into the retention of Pacific records was supported by the AJCP executive. White explained to ANU staff in a memo, by AJCP Officers ‘[h]aving now practically completed the Public Record Office series relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Western Pacific, the project is at a stage which should permit its extension into other areas’.<sup>82</sup> The changing remit of the AJCP from Australasian content to targeting Pacific Island-specific material indicated Australia’s complex position in the world, a former colony and imperial power associated with Britain and geographically positioned in Oceania, with Pacific and Asian neighbours.

In 1957, the first round of LMS reels was sent to Canberra. Since the LMS records were of widespread interest to Australian and New Zealand libraries, the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Victorian and Queensland State Libraries also obtained the complete set of 118 reels of LMS microfilmed positives.<sup>83</sup> The LMS merger with the Commonwealth Missionary Society (CMS) in 1966 saw these transnational historical records transferred from Livingstone House to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

The second run of LMS AJCP material was created in 1966. This recording mainly captured administrative records unavailable in the first filming period, such as communications between Australian and New Zealand LMS administrators.<sup>84</sup> The Directors of the LMS then granted permission to microfilm Board and Committee Minutes up to 1918. The AJCP Officer at that time, F.W. Torrington, wrote to the LMS archivist and librarian, Fletcher, on 4 August 1965. He requested access on behalf of the AJCP:

[A]s complete a record as possible of the work of the London Missionary Society in the Pacific Ocean and Indonesian area. We feel this record would not be complete without a copy of the Minutes of the meetings of the Directors of the Society, 1795–1918, and the Minutes of the appropriate regional Committee up to 1918. As the Methodist Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society have given us permission to copy their Minutes, we feel it would be a pity not to have a similar coverage of London Missionary Society documents... We believe these records will provide valuable source material for scholars in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.<sup>85</sup>

As noted by Torrington, the AJCP was a collection for researchers concerned with the Pacific and instances of imperialism outside of Australia.

Some aspects of the LMS archive were excluded from the copying process based on the judgements of Australian-trained researchers. Written content in Pacific languages was more likely to be excluded from copying than written in English. A memo, undated, but from its position in the archive appearing to be from around October 1965, noted that excluded from the copying process were ‘very rough notes on Pacific languages, some copied from printed books (1 folder). Sermons and talks confined to religion (the pile measure 1 foot in height)’.<sup>86</sup> The items filmed were records that ‘describe missions or areas visited or which give opinions such as the role of missionaries in native society’.<sup>87</sup> As an informal report and update, these items were difficult to categorise in European knowledge systems, as rough notes often appeared in Pacific languages. They were consequently excluded from the copying process. It is important to note that across these various memos, letters, and indexes, also excluded from the LMS copying process, was the input of the indigenous intellectual owners related to this material. The exclusion of Pacific Islanders from processing this material was indicative of the Eurocentric copying processes at the time. The AJCP M-Series LMS collection was curated from the interests of researchers in settler-colonial societies as they grappled with the idea of what constitutes sources for Pacific History.

From the early 1960s, Mander-Jones worked directly with the Pacific History department at ANU to create an inclusive, accessible, relevant AJCP LMS collection. In 1962, Mander-Jones was, as an AJCP Officer, an official representative of the National Library and the Public Library of the NSW. These organisations ‘co-operate[d] with other authorities in Australia, especially with the Australian National University’.<sup>88</sup> With the shared knowledge of historians and other professionals, it is evident that the historian–archive relationship significantly contributed to the collection and return of Australian-Pacific records to their place of creation, if not their communities.

To ensure the AJCP gathered relevant manuscripts for Australian researchers, Mander-Jones used a ‘grapevine’ approach in her AJCP surveys. In her efforts to access content across England, Mander-Jones established connections with ‘book-sellers who specialised in Australiana and by the librarians and other custodians of the major libraries and museums which had important collections relating to Australia and the Pacific’.<sup>89</sup> She also corresponded with Australian-based Pacific historians from the NSW Government Offices in London. Mander-Jones, at every opportunity, supported the AJCP as a collaborative endeavour with researchers.

Demonstrating that the AJCP was an active information system, a characteristic of modern libraries, more LMS reels were created and added to the AJCP in 1966. The historian Maude bypassed White and corresponded directly with Mander-Jones about records that needed to be made accessible in Australia. Maude became a staff member at ANU in 1957. As a former colonial administrator trained in anthropology, Maude came from a tradition of colonial service.<sup>90</sup> As a ‘Pacific bibliophile and documentation expert’, Maude was heavily invested in gaining documentary evidence for Pacific scholars to access.<sup>91</sup> His expertise and passion for Pacific sources were evident as ‘his mornings were frequently taken up in giving audiences to the numerous people who came to him for bibliographical advice or Islands information’.<sup>92</sup> Maude’s philosophy was like Davidson’s – Pacific historians were to foster indigenous voices and scholarship by taking an island-centric approach. Maude suggested where records for the AJCP M-Series were to be located. This was a crucial moment in the collecting process, where historians’ knowledge of dispersed records made it possible to create a valuable surrogate research collection.

Mander-Jones relied on people like Maude, with experience in colonial institutions in the Pacific, to tap into an international knowledge network that could locate historical documents for the AJCP. Australian archivists Monica Wehner and Ewan Maidment explain that ‘[t]he detail and contents of individual documents are usually of secondary interest to archivists’.<sup>93</sup> Communication with others who knew these collections was key to identifying the best records for copying. In a letter to Professor Robert W. Heussler of Nuffield College, Oxford, in 1962, Maude questioned the retention of original Pacific manuscripts in London. He indicated the records should be retained elsewhere as ‘Britain takes a small and steadily decreasing interest in the Pacific Islands’.<sup>94</sup> Letters from Maude to Mander-Jones demonstrate his appreciation of her AJCP work. These letters, spanning two decades into the 1980s, highlighted the ongoing and crucial connections between the ANU and the NLA – a factor that influenced the project’s growth.

Dorothy Shineberg, a former student of Maude’s and Pacific historian, also corresponded with Mander-Jones at this time. Shineberg defined, through her research and teaching, the parameters of Pacific history in the 1960s. Amongst numerous folders of thermal paper and photograph copies of Pacific archival material from imperial archives at ANU archives are Shineberg’s course notes and teaching cards. On an undated card, likely written after 1964 (as she was appointed as a Research Fellow in the Department of Pacific History at ANU), Shineberg noted a lesson regarding ‘What is island-centric history?’ In blue pen, half the card is covered in her clear handwriting. She tells the reader, ‘Don’t find it odd [here queer was written, then scribbled out by Shineberg] that Europeans are studying the Pacific history, because at the moment they accidentally happen to be well placed in a physical sense to do so, & therefore they should do it as well as they can to be of use to Pacific islanders to join in the business’.<sup>95</sup> Possibly written for her students, the question prompted the reader, or listener, to think about who produced Pacific history, who had access to records, and the effect of the emerging sub-discipline on Australian worldviews.

Using the AJCP, Shineberg produced Pacific histories. In 1965 Mander-Jones wrote to Shineberg, responding to her request for information about Captain Thomas Beckford Simpson and Captain Edward Woodin, general traders in the Southwest Pacific.<sup>96</sup> This information would significantly inform Shineberg's book, *They Came for Sandalwood: A Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-West Pacific 1830–1865*. According to Maude, Shineberg 'demolishes the time-hallowed view effectively that the sandalwood trade was in the main predatory – many have suspected that this missionary-fostered theory would not bear too close an examination'.<sup>97</sup> In 1967, Shineberg corresponded with Mander-Jones about Noumea consular records and provided record details from the Foreign Office, which Shineberg provided to Maude.<sup>98</sup> As much as Mander-Jones was pushing manuscript information out to scholars, they were pushing manuscript information towards her. In the scope of a larger, Australasian project of the AJCP, Mander-Jones was unable to meet the growing and significant demands of the Pacific historians. A year after Harry Maude penned his arguments for improved access to Pacific Island records in the report 'The Documentary Basis for Pacific Studies: A Report on Progress and Desiderata (1967), the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (PMB) was established.<sup>99</sup> Unlike the AJCP, which concentrated on imperial collections, PMB preserves archives, manuscripts, and rare materials in the Pacific Islands that are at risk of loss or destruction.<sup>100</sup>

Shineberg's requests for LMS material from Europe were echoed by other Pacific historians. The letters and papers of missionaries like George were requested from ANU Pacific School. Mission historian Niel Gunson flagged 'two categories of material, 'South Sea Odds' and 'Deputation Papers' as required evidence for *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas 1797–1860*.<sup>101</sup> By 1966 historians and early career researchers associated with Maude, such as Patricia Pendergast, wrote to Mander-Jones, and requested the 'personal letters of some of the early London Missionary Society missionaries, e.g., Lawes, Chalmers... or letters written by their wives'.<sup>102</sup> The result was a collection that targeted records that contained marginalised voices. In 1967 Maude released the impressive *The Documentary Basis for Pacific Studies*, a survey of Pacific documents in Europe. This paper advocated for the acquisition of island materials not due to military or political ambitions but for the 'advancement of knowledge'.<sup>103</sup> Pacific historians' requests from this period indicate the rapid growth of this sub-discipline and the range of Australasian materials held outside of the region. This approach excluded Australia and New Zealand and supported the study of the Pacific Islands' particular 'multi-cultural situations, involving both the Islanders and settlers'.<sup>104</sup> The scope of the AJCP broadened to incorporate 'the extensive files of the missionary societies, which were predominantly concerned with New Zealand and the Pacific Islands'.<sup>105</sup> Mander-Jones credited Maude with providing 'copies of lists of value to the Australian Joint Copying Project'.<sup>106</sup> Eventually, the AJCP influenced histories such as Murray Groves' book, *The Motu of Papua: Tradition in a Time of Change*, and Patricia Clarke's Lifelines project.<sup>107</sup> While Jane Samson utilised LMS records on-site at SOAS for *Imperial Benevolence: Making British Authority in the Pacific Islands*, she accessed the relationships and networks of the AJCP community to access additional historical documents. The diverse analytical focus of Pacific historians broadened, encouraged, partly, by LMS materials being 'made more widely available on microfilm through the Australian Joint Copying Project'.<sup>108</sup> In 1966, Maude and Davidson established the *Journal of Pacific History*.<sup>109</sup> This provided another avenue for publication and a professional identity formation for Australian historians fascinated with the Pacific region.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has shown the workings and outcomes of the relationship between historians and archivists. The reciprocal relationships that transferred information between Pacific historians

and Mander-Jones amounted to a co-curation of the AJCP M-Series collection in the 1950s and 1960s. Giving attention to the relationship between Mander-Jones and Pacific Historians highlights how changes in historiography affect the desired scope of a surrogate collection and its use.

Historian–archive relations in the 1950s and 1960s re-framed imperial archives for use in Australasia and Pacific Island-centric history by describing the surveying and copying of primary sources for the AJCP. The LMS reels were created in the context of the 1950s and 1960s regional political ambitions. They were also created as new social histories – histories focused on indigenous people and women’s experiences – broadened researchers’ understandings of what records were worth preserving in an archive. The AJCP M-Series LMS records were thus acquired for Australian researchers and curated in association with the interests of ANU Pacific School researchers. There is an evident impact of a particular historiography and social and cultural era in the AJCP M-M-Series LMS material in particular.

Alongside Pacific historians, Mander-Jones alternatively accepted and contested Australia’s European historical records for preservation. The call by Davidson and other Pacific historians at the ANU School for new, island-centric histories enabled these European records to be reinterpreted and framed in a manner other than the Australasian knowledge networks preferred by the libraries. Mander-Jones library training guided an interdisciplinary and transnational network of scholars to assemble the AJCP M-Series LMS collection. Acknowledging Mander-Jones’s involvement with Pacific historians, such as Maude and Shineberg, revealed a reciprocal flow of information between historians and archivists.

With the creation of the AJCP M-Series LMS records, Pacific historiography had sources for research, expanding output concerning trade, mission, and indigenous histories. Maude later recognised this by writing to Mander-Jones that a debt was owed to her ‘by Pacific historians in particular’.<sup>111</sup> These copies supported ethnohistories that presented a more nuanced, Pacific-centric understanding of the past. The lack of Pacific Islanders involved in this step towards democratising history was unexplored by both groups and indicative of their eras’ politics and social mores. Paying attention to researchers’ intended use of the newly digitised AJCP records will facilitate a new generation of reciprocal relationships and collection improvements.

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**ORCID**Deborah Lee-Talbot **References**

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## ARTICLE

## User Needs in the Digital Archives of the Popular Movement

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**Abstract**

A comprehensive understanding of user needs is required to support the development of useful digital archives. While archival science research has met this demand by inquiring into a significant range of user groups, users of popular movement archives remain understudied. Addressing this gap, this paper reports on a focus group study of key academic and professional users ( $N = 21$ ) of popular movement archives. This study reveals user needs that are an amalgamation of informational, management-related, social, personal, and technical needs that principally emanate from the archival records themselves rather than the digital archive platform. Purposes and uses, archive and digital archive, disciplinary background, and expertise are four contexts of user needs with a significance of how users frame and express their record-finding and record-use needs in popular movement archives. The main conclusion of this study is that while it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of user groups and archives, it is similarly important to be aware and explicit about what kind of an archive a popular movement archive is for its different users and uses, and when developing a digital archive, what kind of an archive a particular digital popular movement archive is aiming to be and for whom.

**Keywords:** *User studies; Digital archives; Community archives; Popular movement archives; Focus groups*

The development of digital archives – broadly understood as record-keeping systems for managing and disseminating digitized records, born-digital records, or both – has attracted considerable interest and effort in both government and institutional archives, and in the diverse initiatives grouped under the ‘community archives’ umbrella term.<sup>1</sup> A key theme in the literature is that a sustained and thorough involvement of users in the development processes of digital archives can result in increased relevance of archival services, contents, and functions to important user groups.<sup>2</sup> A well-grounded understanding of users and user needs here emerges as a necessity for achieving and measuring the usefulness of digital archives. Mirroring the user-centered design paradigm,<sup>3</sup> digital archives add value to the institutions or arenas they emanate from in correspondence to the degree to which they can fulfill basic user needs.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, embracing user-centered research and design

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strategies<sup>5</sup> and engaging in user-driven exploration and experimentation<sup>6</sup> have been suggested as the main path toward understanding and accommodating user needs in digital archives. Key steps include understanding the archival materials, identifying important user groups and their needs, tailoring the digital archive to match the identified needs, and collecting user feedback to understand whether the user-need estimations were accurate or not.<sup>7</sup> Technology can meet some user needs and especially provide opportunities to allow multiple organizational schemes and entries to co-exist,<sup>8</sup> but in spite of some optimistic expectations, it does not provide a blanket solution to the problem of catering for all conceivable needs within the space of digital archives.

Although there is a large number of studies focusing on the needs and preferences of a wide array of user groups in relation to different archives – ranging from historians,<sup>9</sup> architects and artists,<sup>10</sup> to archaeologists,<sup>11</sup> anthropologists,<sup>12</sup> educators, government officials,<sup>13</sup> and beyond<sup>14</sup> – the users of popular movement archives are notably under-researched. This is a major blind spot in the literature of archival science user research. Popular movements are underpinned by grassroots-based albeit often highly institutionalized organizations with a significant historical and present-day impact. Examples of popular movements span various civic, cultural, and political arenas, including civil rights, climate challenges, democratic governance, and the functioning of the labor market.

The archives of popular movements commonly exhibit a unique combination of characteristics otherwise manifested separately in government, institutional, and community archives in having holdings of civic, administrative, identity formation, memory making, and multidisciplinary scholarly importance.<sup>15</sup> The closely related nebulous notion of community archives,<sup>16</sup> which covers not only informal local history archives, amateur association, and fan community archives but also larger institutionalized archives,<sup>17</sup> is still in many notable ways different from popular movement archives. Popular movements are to a lesser extent focused on more singular issues or agendas and are more complex and more far-reaching entities of collective action manifested in nationwide and often international organizations that play roles in shaping societal macro-trends. As a result, the archives of popular movements showcase some of the variability in terms of records and memorabilia kept as community archives do, while sharing much of the historical scope and many archive-organizational traits with government and other administrative archives. Better insights into the needs of the equally complex scholarly and professional user groups of popular movement archives not only would stand to benefit the development and design of popular movement archives but also offer more generally relevant results to the archives of other non-governmental and social-movement organizations positioned at the crossroads of academic, community, and public interests.

*The purpose of this study* is to delve into the needs of academic and professional users of the digital archives of the popular movement and to highlight core usability features to consider in the development of digital popular movement archives. This study subscribes to the widespread notion of users having expert knowledge within the domain of their professional practice that, if compared and contrasted with those of other user groups and their settings of work, can be elicited to inform robust understandings of how to put into being services suited to the needs of a broad range of users and many parameters of use situations.<sup>18</sup> Literature on the (archival) needs of researchers<sup>19</sup> and the needs of community-archive users and participants<sup>20</sup> is drawn upon to frame popular movement archives and their users as complex archival entities with facets and functionalities connecting simultaneously to the academic, government, and the non-governmental organization archival spheres. The empirical basis of the paper is a focus group interview study encompassing seven groups with a total of 21 participants (3 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 4 + 3). The focus group interviews were planned and organized drawing on task analyses<sup>21</sup> and critical incident techniques,<sup>22</sup> and participants were recruited

from academia (representing qualitative, quantitative, computer-driven, and humanistic research approaches) and organizations affiliated with the Swedish branch of a major political popular movement that has had significant impact on the development of civil society in Sweden and internationally.

## Literature review

### *Digital community archives and user needs*

Much of the literature on community archives, especially in the Western hemisphere, has focused on cultural and sexual minorities, and indigenous and migrant populations.<sup>23</sup> In addition to increasing the representation of previously marginalized groups in archival records, one of the key concerns of the community archives movement has been to broaden the conceptions of the use of archives and their users. This agenda entails moving from the traditional administrative, civic, and scholarly utilization of governmental and institutional archives<sup>24</sup> to embrace communities with a direct stake in particular archival records either as their creators or as those the records concern. A rebirth of interest in user studies in the archival field at the turn of the millennium after initial calls in the 1980s<sup>25</sup> parallels rather unsurprisingly with the rise of the contemporary community archives movement and evolution of digital archives. As Gilliland-Swetland<sup>26</sup> criticized in the late 1990s, many of the references to ‘other’ groups have tended to remain too broad to be operationalizable in the development of access services. Archivists have also tended to be primarily concerned with the needs of individual users visiting archival institutions rather than obtaining an understanding of the broader patterns of user needs and preferences.<sup>27</sup>

One of the caveats of thinking in terms of communities is to assume that there is a natural or only one community with a stake for every archive, especially as identifying and anticipating community needs has proven to be extremely difficult.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the emphasis on communities and the broadening of the notion of stakeholder have led to a necessity to cater for an increasing variety of user needs<sup>29</sup> and to consider the relation of archives and communities as an entanglement rather than as something given.<sup>30</sup> Digital archives, for their part, have led to that archivists no more have a personal contact with every user, and that user-led archival work – e.g., the development of systems, metadata and finding aids – has to be done on the basis of insight into broader patterns of user needs<sup>31</sup> and information-seeking practices.<sup>32</sup>

The principal difficulty in addressing user needs is that records are typically conceptualized differently when originally created and described than when they are sought.<sup>33</sup> Earlier studies point to that online users who lack the direct contact with an archivist – who generally have a better understanding of how records are described and organized – also tend to need more information, more complete and better-quality information,<sup>34</sup> and more intuitive user interface designed from the premises of their needs rather than the structure of descriptions.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to finding aids based on the principles of archival knowledge organization, users often find subject indexes useful.<sup>36</sup> Studies of how users document archival records show that they tend to focus on information that is more detailed and makes records findable, whereas archivists’ descriptions are not only more systematic but also abstract.<sup>37</sup> For descriptive information, users value the date, information on the location of the original material or access numbers, the extent of the material, title, document type, and an overview description.<sup>38</sup>

Non-archivists have difficulties in understanding archival terminology<sup>39</sup> and need easy-to-understand-information and instructions on what information is available and where<sup>40</sup> and what is excluded.<sup>41</sup> They also tend to need customized finding aids<sup>42</sup> and a clear understanding of how the finding aids work to use them effectively.<sup>43</sup> Retrieving specific items has been found difficult. It can be difficult to know where to start searching in the first place.<sup>44</sup>

Also, query-formulation causes problems. The explicit question in mind might not correspond with the real need.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, understanding what the retrieved records are can be difficult.<sup>46</sup> The contemporary community archives movement has gained a lot of traction from the development and availability of affordable digital technologies.<sup>47</sup> Numerous contemporary community archives are digital only, and many others focus on using digital technologies to reach out to their communities rather than preserving physical documents.<sup>48</sup> Many of the problems in navigating digital archives boil down to the question that users tend to be interested in the archival content rather than in the catalogues.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, successful retrieval of records requires in-depth understanding of their context. More precisely, this entails understanding them in the context of their archival bond.<sup>50</sup> Users' level of expertise in using of archives and computers, and in the subject matter, affects their success<sup>51</sup> with a major difference between novices and experts.<sup>52</sup> It should however be noted that studies have also made it apparent that categorizing users by level of proficiency is difficult, and that its significance for better understanding user needs is ultimately unclear.<sup>53</sup>

Content-wise, the community archives movement has underlined how many users are not necessarily interested in 'the records of the rich and powerful' but rather on matters and everyday lives of those excluded from traditional administrative archives.<sup>54</sup> The purposes of accessing archival records vary as well. Earlier user studies of archives, museum, and library users have identified differences between professionals and academics, educational users, hobbyists, browsers, known-item seekers, and meaning-makers.<sup>55</sup> For non-professionals visitors, curiosity and serendipitous browsing are major motivations to access heritage collections.<sup>56</sup> However, it has been observed that many amateurs work much like their professional colleagues.<sup>57</sup> Context is generally important for all users, whereas the importance of the technical quality of the digital material varies between users and uses.<sup>58</sup>

As a whole, the literature points to a complexity of identifying and categorizing user needs and addressing them to a satisfactory degree. A major difficulty for catering for the needs of multiple user communities is that their needs can be at odds with each other.<sup>59</sup> Another complication is that especially for the community members, the needs are not necessarily information needs but record-keeping needs (i.e., that certain records are kept) or, for example, identity or memory needs.<sup>60</sup> Topics of interest can be personally important individuals, key moments in history, social roles and customs, and everyday life in different times.<sup>61</sup> The critique from the community archives literature and actors<sup>62</sup> has also made increasingly clear the political nature of all decisions to present and leave out information.<sup>63</sup> A major issue in the inclusion of community members and their needs is to embrace community archives as a part of the archival paradigm instead of dichotomizing between proper scholarly, administrative and societally valuable, and other local and amateurish users of archives.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Researchers' needs and use of digital archives*

Similarly to research on community archives, a long line of studies has shed light on researchers' practices and needs pertaining to the use of archival materials.<sup>65</sup> These studies have focused on disciplines and methodologies principally situated in the humanities – often dealing with history and historical subjects –,<sup>66</sup> linguistics,<sup>67</sup> and more quantitative and computer-driven domains like the digital humanities.<sup>68</sup> While information practices have changed since the advent of the web in the 1990s, much has remained the same. Although disciplinary differences exist,<sup>69</sup> databases are commonly experienced as being shallow, and browsing and informal means of finding relevant information continue to be relevant.<sup>70</sup> Another crucial premise of using digital archives is users' need to be able to trust on the materials. Chassanoff found that knowing where a physical original of a digitized record is located and how it can be accessed is an important element of trust-building in digital archives.<sup>71</sup> Maxwell's findings also show that

trust is a key factor underpinning the usefulness of digitized records for research. His results simultaneously underline that the capacity of different digitized records for engendering trust varies between user groups.<sup>72</sup> For example, studies have indicated that historians more strongly prefer digital reproductions of the original record to be in a photographic form,<sup>73</sup> while linguists' modes of text-based work may be more compatible with transcribed corpuses.<sup>74</sup>

A major benefit of digital archives is the possibility to conduct full-text search in all materials. Several studies show that this conforms to researcher needs.<sup>75</sup> The drawback of the approach is the difficulty to ensure that the search results are comprehensive. It can also make understanding the context of the resulting records more difficult.<sup>76</sup> For these reasons, in some particular instances, full-text searching can be less compatible with long-established archival research methods based on browsing as the principal strategy to finding relevant records.<sup>77</sup> Another benefit of online sources in general is that they can be helpful especially in cross-disciplinary research.<sup>78</sup> Another feature of digital archives is that they can offer completely different modes of searching and finding records compared to non-digital archives. Such approaches include content-based image retrieval (CBIR) for records with image content<sup>79</sup> and natural language processing (NLP) applications like topic modeling for extracting information from textual records.<sup>80</sup>

Researchers' success in accessing archives is typically based on their background and contextual knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Expertise of this kind is termed 'archival intelligence' by Yakel and Torres and is understood to be comprised of, among other things, insight into archival theory, archival practice, and archival institutions, as well as familiarity with strategies for conducting successful archival research.<sup>82</sup> In the same vein of reasoning, Jensen<sup>83</sup> argues that key archival knowledge archives also includes insights into system design, archival knowledge organization, and the economic framework of digitization initiatives. Carbajal and Caswell further underline that knowledge about specifically *digital* archival infrastructures and associated curatorial practices is required to proficiently be able to conduct research in such settings,<sup>84</sup> even it has been noted that seasoned archival researchers and other users with general experience of archival knowledge organization often find it easier to navigate a digital archive.<sup>85</sup> This means also that interdisciplinary researchers tend to have additional needs of contextual and background information in comparison to those working in one domain only.<sup>86</sup> Relevant information comprises both descriptions of the material and how it came into being;<sup>87</sup> for example, how it was digitized,<sup>88</sup> and what are the origins of the included metadata descriptions.<sup>89</sup> The need for process information or paradata has been suggested to be especially crucial in interdisciplinary contexts.<sup>90</sup> Many researchers' preference to work with personal collections signals not only the inadequacy of public repositories and available tools but also the difficulties in providing descriptions that would be comprehensive enough to cater for researchers' needs.<sup>91</sup> One critical problem is that different users need different and different types of descriptions, for example concept and content-oriented ones.<sup>92</sup> However, in practice, a single description can often be read in different ways and fulfill multiple needs depending on the research questions.<sup>93</sup>

Researchers' search strategies vary from broad explorative searching to in-depth analysis of individual records.<sup>94</sup> Search strategies diverge and are often difficult to predict<sup>95</sup> but often begin with orientation and proceed to more specific searches<sup>96</sup> with different types of information needs emerging at different stages of research work.<sup>97</sup> Research processes are seldom linear, and they are closely tied to the subject matter of the research.<sup>98</sup> Many researchers, including historians, do also typically use materials from different archives in one project,<sup>99</sup> and in comparison to scientists, they search independently without help from information specialists.<sup>100</sup> Search strategies can also, to different extents, align with on-site workflows or sharply diverge from them, focusing on specific affordances of digital archives like keyword search and computer-assisted searching.<sup>101</sup>

Unsurprisingly, trending research topics steer what types of materials are popular among researchers. For example, growing interest in women in historical studies has increased the demand of records capable of shedding light on that particular topic.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, the research field affects what types of materials and sources are relevant<sup>103</sup> even if it does not explain all variation.<sup>104</sup> For example, data intensive digital humanities research leads to additional and different needs in comparison to small-scale studies based on a limited base of source materials.<sup>105</sup> Also, different disciplinary and epistemic backgrounds play out in user needs. While many scientists and social scientists search literature and materials not familiar to them, many humanities scholars are well-acquainted with the material and types of sources they use.<sup>106</sup> Researchers conducting cumulative rather than summative research have less use for generic tools and secondary information.<sup>107</sup> Benardou and Dunning<sup>108</sup> argue that only those generic infrastructures that are able to accommodate for the granularity of the needs of different sub-communities can be successful. Bates and colleagues found that in comparison to social scientists, humanities researchers search by using proper names – known documents and works, individuals, and geographical and chronological terms – rather than broader descriptive search terms. Their search strategies also often consist of a combination of multiple facets<sup>109</sup> like a topic, geographic location, and time period. Studies by Late and Kumpulainen and Borlund and colleagues largely corroborate these results, adding that humanities researchers also often search for document names and specific types of media (documents, images, and films).<sup>110</sup>

The variety of document types used by researchers are broad. Not only newspapers are a popular source among historians,<sup>111</sup> but also correspondence, manuscripts, photographs, and periodicals are used by many.<sup>112</sup> As a whole, it is difficult to deem any particular type of record entirely irrelevant. Depending on research questions and topics, it might be necessary to have different materials and different impressions of the same material (e.g., image of a text and transcription or an image and description) available side by side.<sup>113</sup> However, even if the available tools and descriptions would lack details and comprehensiveness, the availability of particular records is still the most important requirement.<sup>114</sup> Findings suggest that when searching for images, researchers require high technical image quality.<sup>115</sup> In some cases, the existing digital resources might not be of high enough quality or contain all necessary details. In such cases, even if digitization methods progress and improve, researchers still need to consult original materials.<sup>116</sup>

As a whole, the earlier research has identified a broad range of user needs regarding digital archival records and archival search systems. So far, much of the focus of user research has been on information searching and retrieval and the needs of individual groups of users either in general or in relation to specific archives. It is also palpable that categorizing needs on the basis of user expertise, background, and professional status is difficult.

### **Methods and materials**

The present study is based on focus group interviews with 21 participants in seven groups (3 + 2 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 4 + 3). The interview centered on elucidating the participants' views on current and future needs crucial to their ability of accomplishing work tasks in digital archives, with an emphasis on needs relating to finding and using records. All 21 participants were in their different professional capacities significantly, but differently, they invested in the archives of a Swedish branch of a major international political popular movement. The popular movement in question has a long-established archival tradition, and its archives have notable historical value and significant usefulness for present-day organizational matters.

The focus group methodology was chosen because it is well-proven in archival science user research,<sup>117</sup> is suitable for identifying the needs of user groups that are simultaneously distinct from each other, and has a degree of internal heterogeneity while remaining reasonably

homogenous.<sup>118</sup> The design of the focus group study draws on critical incident techniques<sup>119</sup> and task analyses<sup>120</sup> to better tease out and capture the needs most closely tied to successful interactions with digital archives in the studied user groups. The focus group interviews were between 60 and 105 min in length, averaging 89 min, and were conducted in mid-late 2021. Six of the interviews were conducted in Swedish and one in English. All translations from Swedish to English have been done by the authors. Groups 1–4 ('researchers') were populated by academic researchers employed in the Swedish higher education sector, affiliated with multiple SSH disciplines and engaging in a range of quantitative and qualitative research approaches, with a majority of historians. Groups 5–6 ('popular movement representatives' [PMR]) comprised professionals working in a range of Swedish professional organizations affiliated with the popular movement under study. Digital humanities scientists (DHSs) formed group 7. All participants were in the mid-to-late career stage of their respective domains, which offered the conditions to delve into archival user needs on the basis of deep and multifaceted familiarity with the archival holdings of the popular movement. Table 1 shows an overview of focus group sizes and compositions.

The recruitment of participants was done on the basis of two criteria informing purposive selection: the participants (1) belonged to the main academic and professional stakeholders of the popular movement's digital archives, i.e., academic researchers, professionals working in the organizations affiliated with the popular movement, and DHS; they (2) had a strong and thoroughgoing connection to the popular movement's archives in their scholarly and professional activities, although the degree and nature of this engagement could vary. Experts in various arenas connecting to the Swedish branch of the popular movement in focus in the present paper were consulted to determine the eligibility criteria and identify potential candidates to recruit. The interview data were analyzed by the authors drawing on the constant comparative method,<sup>121</sup> oscillating between the conceptualization of user needs and adjustment of the coding structure as new information emerged from the exploration of the interview transcripts. The validity of the analysis was verified also using negative case analysis,<sup>122</sup> in which both authors participated.

The results and data collection procedure of this study have several limitations. The main limitation connecting to data collection is the limited size of several of the focus groups. While it is difficult to precisely determine how many participants a focus group should have,<sup>123</sup> it is frequently agreed upon that a central offering of the focus group methodology is that it allows the researcher to use the interaction between the group members to better grasp shared sensemaking processes and the negotiations of meaning and significance.<sup>124</sup> This limitation is, however, mitigated by the fact that the participants included in the present study were 'information-rich'<sup>125</sup> and extensively familiar with the interview subject matter.

Another limitation is that the study's results are qualitative in nature and have a restricted potential for generalization. Although the range of users of popular movement digital archives is wide and their needs diverse, this study can, on the basis of its comparably extensive focus group study on the needs of key user groups in popular movement archives, address a major knowledge gap in archival science user studies that has potential to both underline and add to the results of previous user studies of professional and scholarly archive use in the popular movement domain and beyond.

## Analysis

The focus group interviews focused specifically on user needs in popular movement archives relating to finding records and using records. Interface design needs, needs of search functionalities, and search-result processing functionalities emerged in the interview record as key subthemes of user needs relating to finding records. Record-use needs, on the other hand, comprised support for a wide spectrum of use cases and needs of supporting process

*Table 1.* The seven user groups participating in the focus group interviews

| <i>User group no.</i> | <i>Professional or scholarly identifiers of the participants</i>  | <i>Group size</i> | <i>Denominator</i>                                |
|-----------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| 1                     | Researchers in history (2) and literary studies (1) with an interest in the popular movement, its history, and activities                     | 3                 | Researchers, group 1; 'R1'                        |
| 2                     | Researchers in history (1) and business economics (1) with an interest in the popular movement, its history, and activities                   | 2                 | Researchers, group 2; 'R2'                        |
| 3                     | Researchers in history (2) with an interest in the popular movement, its history, and activities  | 2                 | Researchers, group 3; 'R3'                        |
| 4                     | Researchers in history (2) and literary studies (1) with an interest in the popular movement, its history, and activities                     | 3                 | Researchers, group 4; 'R4'                        |
| 5                     | Popular movement representatives with duties that include archival use for administrative purposes  | 4                 | Popular movement representatives, group 1; 'PMR1' |
| 6                     | Popular movement representatives with duties that include archival use for administrative purposes  | 4                 | Popular movement representatives, group 2; 'PMR2' |
| 7                     | Digital humanities scientists with an interest in using digital archives for large-scale computational analysis of digitized source materials | 3                 | Digital humanities scientists; 'DHS'              |

documentation and metadata. The findings of user needs of finding records and using records are summarized in Tables 2 and 3, respectively.

### *Finding records*

#### **Interface design needs**

Needs related to the interface design of digital popular movement archives not only are to a large extent overlapping across the studied focus groups of researchers, PMR, and DHS but also showcase differences. All seven groups emphasized the importance of an interface with 'robust user friendliness' (R1) that can serve as a link and mediator between users and the records of digital archives (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS). Recurrently mentioned features of user-friendly interfaces include a simple but professional-looking graphical design centered not principally on showcasing records, but rather on facilitating user access to archival holdings in a way that encourages users to pursue and achieve their search objectives. Here, researchers and DHS (R1; R4; DHS) expressed a stronger preference for an interface that only to a limited extent uses visual means, while a more extensive use of pictures and imagery was considered useful by the PMR1–2. Interestingly, the PMR also noted that the graphic design of the interface should reflect the popular movement and its visual traditions.

A common position is that the interface of digital popular movement archives can engage and accommodate both novice and expert users if its search fields, finding aids, and other points of access into the holdings are presented in a gradual way, where easy-to-use search functionalities are located on the landing page, and more advanced and customizable options are accessible after some additional site navigations. All groups recognized that this would allow novice users to pursue possibly less well-defined inquiries and search strategies without being hindered by a wealth of search options that would require the archival experience and domain knowledge of an advanced user to be employed with good results (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS). The researcher groups underscored the counter-productiveness of overly complicated interfaces that are difficult to navigate and use (R1; R4). However, while the groups engaged

**Table 2.** User needs related to finding records

| Category   | Need                      | Key user groups with the need |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Interface design needs                                       | Robust user friendliness  | R; DHS; PMR                   |
|  | Easy search interface     | R; DHS; PMR                   |
|  | Advanced search interface | R; DHS                        |
| Needs of search and search-result processing functionalities | Free text search          | R; DHS; (PMR)                 |
|  | Structured search         | PMR                           |
|  | Thematic search           | R; DHS; PMR                   |
|  | Results filtering         | R; PMR                        |
|  | Archival finding aids     | R; PMR                        |

User groups referenced within parenthesis signify that the associated need is present to a lesser degree. PMR, popular movement representatives; DHS, digital humanities scientists.

**Table 3.** User needs related to using records

| Category                                  | Need  | Key user groups with the need |
|---|---|-------------------------------|
| Needs of record use                       | Historical documentation: Historical research and knowledge | R; (PMR)                      |
|   | Historical documentation: Education                         | R                             |
|   | Historical documentation: Decision support                  | PMR                           |
|   | Records as data   | DHS; (R)                      |
|   | Knowledge exploration                                       | R; PMR                        |
|   | Downloading records contents                                | R; PMR                        |
|   | Downloading records as data                                 | DHS                           |
| Needs of process information and metadata | Archival provenance and organization                        | R; DHS; PMR                   |
|   | Processing information                                      | (DHS)                         |
|   | Related records and information                             | R; (PMR)                      |

User groups referenced within parenthesis signify that the associated need is present to a lesser degree. PMR, popular movement representatives; DHS, digital humanities scientists.

in research (researchers, DHS) placed a larger emphasis on digital archive interfaces offering more immediate access to rich search and filtering options, the groups consisting of PMR more strongly stressed the importance of the interfaces presenting, allowing access to the more advanced features of the archives in a step-by-step fashion with simpler decision paths and parameter deliberations (R1; A4; PMR1; DHS).

#### Needs of search and search-result processing functionalities

All seven focus groups articulated that the needs pertaining to search and search-result processing functionalities of digital popular movement archives are of great importance because they underpin the core offering of such repositories: to make digitized records of the popular movement findable and accessible. Four principal implementations of search and results-processing functionalities were requested. These were free-text and thematic search-options, results filtering, and access to the holdings on the basis of archival knowledge organization principles, including finding aids. Useful free-text search functionalities corresponded to a large extent across the participating focus groups and included concepts and entities ('strike', 'lockout', R2;

also R1; R3; DHS; PMR2), the proper names of individuals (authors, people mentioned in the materials) and geographic locations (DHS; PMR2), and the time of publication or creation (R4; PMR2; DHS) of the archival record. PMR more strongly emphasized the need to being able to search for the titles of specific documents (PMR1–2), while researchers and DHS discussed their use of free-text search options in more exploratory terms (R2; R3; DHS).

Commonly mentioned thematic search functionalities and filtering options mirrored the free-text search capacities to a large extent: browsing and filtering on the basis of organization, temporal thematizations, and geographic mappings of documentary points of origin were requested (R1; R2; PMR1–2; DHS). Additionally, some interviewees expressed the need for content-based thematizations as a means of navigation. These thematizations (e.g., popular movement cultural expressions, educational policy, the labor market, social issues; R1; PMR2) were seen as a way of guiding users to recognize interesting and relevant topics available for exploration without requiring the formulation of keywords or search strings in use scenarios where searchers are lacking basic archival, platform, and domain knowledge. Researchers and popular movement officials acknowledged it is difficult to find a reasonable approach to group archival materials according to their contents (R1; R4), while the DHS suggested that this could be done by applying computational methods like named entity recognition (DHS). In the researcher focus groups (R1; R2), the thematizations of content as a search functionality were contested to the point of being characterized as detrimental to the usefulness of digital archives. Speaking from the viewpoints of both researchers and educators, several interviewees in the researcher focus groups considered useful content grouping as possible to achieve only from singular particular perspectives. These interviewees expressed concerns that pre-made content-based thematizations of archival materials might obfuscate, for new users, the importance of approaching archival search as a purpose-led and innately exploratory process. In contrast to thematized groupings of archival records as an entry point into the holdings of digital popular movement archives, both researchers and DHS understood free-text search results supplemented with suggestions of expanded search terms based on estimated semantic relevance and co-occurrence frequencies in the searched holdings to be useful additions (R1; R3; R4; DHS).

Several focus groups, however, agreed that there is a need to be able to use established modes of searching and finding archival records also in digital archives. All groups of researchers, DHS, and PMR underlined the usefulness of provenance information, which was seen to support several tasks ranging from search and search-result processing, user interpretation, and understanding of the organizational context of archival materials, to serving as a point of entry to the digital holdings themselves (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS). Researchers and PMR requested detailed provenance information (section numbers, names of sub-organizations and sub-associations, chain of custody, including notable events), while the DHS had more basic needs of provenance information (R1–2; R4; PMR1–2; DHS). The groups of researchers and PMR pointed to the usefulness of digital popular movement archives, offering a genealogy of the organizations whose records they keep, pointing to the complex organizational history of the domain that is difficult to overview even with many years of academic or professional experience (R2; R3; R4; PMR2). Moreover, particularly in the researcher focus groups, prevalent modes of pre-digital archival organization of provenance information seem to have impacted user expectations also in the sense that prevalent ways of organizing materials in physical archives were described as a means to achieve effective browsing of digital archival holdings (R1–3). Several reasons were put forward supporting why the document type-based archival organization scheme would be needed in digital popular movement archives. The scheme was understood as being proven to function well also when used to organize and navigate large archival holdings (R2), and using the scheme to search for records is already a part of the skill set of historians invested in archival research with respect not only to searching

and search-result processing (R1–3) but also to writing references to archival records in a mode that is well-established in the community of academic historians (R1–4).

### *Using records*

The analysis also highlights multiple needs related to records use, metadata, and process information for users. The main categories of identified needs are summarized in Table 3.

### **Needs of records use**

Beyond needs related to how users find records in digital popular movement archives, the results show a wealth of needs of record use that are to different extents shared across the focus groups. These needs of record use emerge as intertwined with needs of process information and metadata that facilitate and, in some cases, pivotally underpin record usability.

Two overarching record use needs were expressed in the interviews. The role of digital popular movement archives in the professional activities of researchers (R1–4) and PMR1–2 was tied closely to knowledge and knowing of historical occurrences (i.e., using records as historical documentation). The DHS, on the other hand, approached the archive as a part of the methodological chain of large-scale data collection and processing (i.e., records as data). The record-use needs of researchers and PMR, however, display substantive distinctness on a more specific level. The record-use needs of researchers pertain to scholarly research and educational applications (R1–4), while the principal use needs of PMR are to find documentation of past events and decisions of relevance for current objectives and happenings within the popular movement (PMR1–2). The researchers' use of records relates to the work of furthering current research tasks by finding records that could inform about the topics and themes under exploration (R1–4). The researcher focus groups also deemed records from digital popular movement archives to be usable for research initiation tasks, including the testing of hypotheses and the refinement of research questions. The quick iterations of forming research objectives and tentatively exploring the objectives in the archival holdings afforded by digital access to popular movement archives were understood to be very useful in accomplishing such tasks (R1; R3). The needs relating to educational use of the researcher user groups mirror the needs connecting to research initiation in the sense that the immediacy of use in digital popular movement archives was also understood to benefit first-cycle students without previous archival experience by lowering the bar for conducting archival research (R2; R3).

The use of records in the focus groups of PMR has significantly less to do with obtaining insight into historical events within the framework of scholarly knowledge. Instead, the main record-use needs relate to identifying, tracking, and learning about issues within the popular movement of the inquirer or a closely affiliated union or popular movement organization (PMR1–2). While historical information was valued also for its own sake by PMR, the most commonly occurring record-use needs are more closely connected to informing and otherwise facilitating present-day ongoings in popular movements by delving into past decisions, work processes, debates, and other events. In comparison with the researcher user groups, the stronger focus of record-use needs on organizational matters and issues may be explained by the strong influence of certain historical events, like decisions and the different stances taken by popular movements and other popular movement organizations in high-profile policy issues on the national level that determine the current affordances of action (PMR1–2). Immediate finding, accessing, and using of records in digital popular movement archives were also considered to facilitate the record-use needs of PMR. Similar to the viewpoints expressed by the researcher focus groups, the main facilitating element was the ability to access the archival holdings without having to physically visit archives and less that using digital archives was felt more purposeful or easy (PMR1–2).

Several record-use needs in digital popular movement archives are shared by researchers, PMR, and DHS. All groups conveyed that one of the main advantages of using the digital popular movement archives as a site of research, inquiry, and data collection is that its holdings allow for the exploration of how concepts, discussions, activities, and other facets of popular movement organizations developed and changed over time because of the long series of records kept there (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS). No user group stressed that they had a need for the archival records to be digitized in extremely high resolutions in order to accomplish their record-use goals. The key consideration was that the digital scan must be of sufficient quality to be read with ease (R2; R3), although it was recognized that resolution needs may vary from use case to use case (DHS). Another likeness in record-use needs that nevertheless also shows a degree of divergence between the focus groups pertains to the groups' workflows. Transcriptions of printed and handwritten (produced via optical character recognition, OCR, and handwritten text recognition, HTR) records made available via digital popular movement archives in conjunction with digitized versions of the records were understood to be useful for both historical inquiry, investigation, and educational purposes (R1–4; PMR1–2) and computational applications (DHS). In contrast, the researcher focus groups more strongly stressed that access to the digitized records – with or without transcriptions – is the offering of greatest value among all of the features of digital popular movement archives (R1; R2). PMR and DHS expressed a less uniform view of the matter (PMR1–2; DHS).

Further similarities between the groups exist in the modes of access and use of archival records. While being able to analyze and work with records on screen was a seldom expressed need (R1; R3), the analysis shows that much emphasis is put on the importance of a digital archive having accessible and powerful functionalities for downloading records to personal workstations (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS). The focus group interviews show that downloading records is fundamentally important for all groups because it facilitates using records according to users' personal preferences and habitual, work-task-specific workflows. Such workflows vary across and between different users and uses. The researchers and DHS demonstrate many reasons for why having comprehensive download options is an important feature of the archive, ranging from increased ability to manage storage and access to the records (R1–4), facilitating the organization of records, excerpting, and markup (R1–4), to offering better opportunities to work with and analyze the records using the methods and software of choice (R2; R3; PMR1–2; DHS). Researchers oriented toward quantitative methods, and the DHS underlined the importance of archive download features supporting the export of entire corpuses of records (R3; DHS) – including API support (DHS). This is in contrast to PMR and researchers that work with qualitative methodologies who didn't foresee such needs for themselves. A similar segmentation can be observed in the export file formats requested by the focus groups. Principally qualitative record uses were seen to be supported by, e.g., text documents (R4; PMR1–2) and PDF (R3; R4; PMR1; PMR2; DHS), whereas qualitative approaches required tabular data and machine-readable data outputs like CSV and XML (R3; R4; DHS).

#### Needs of process information and metadata

In parallel to needs relating to records use, there is a need of process information and metadata *about* the records. In this context, *metadata* signifies information about the records and the archival holdings of popular movement archives. *Process information*, or *paradata*, is information that describes the means, motivations, and methods by which, e.g., a record, a digital reproduction of a record or a collection of records came into being. The focus groups' needs for metadata and process information are often intertwined and difficult to separate from each other. They both address digital popular movement archive users' need to be able

to understand and gauge the usability of records and repositories for the different purposes of their work (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS).

One of the interviewees expressed a common position concerning the need of process information in popular movement archives when stating that, while he ‘honestly didn’t care too much about how the digitization [had] been technically performed’, it was/is very important to know ‘where [a digitized] record comes from, [and] what its place is in relation to the rest of the archival holdings’ (R3). Little interest was expressed across all focus groups in technical process information describing how the digital popular movement archives and the digital reproduction of records found therein were produced; this is because of a widespread trust in the institutions and their workflow of digitizing records (R1–4; PMR1–2; DHS). It was however noted that some users might require information about what hardware and software that had been involved in creating the digitized archival holdings (DHS; R4). Process information about how the records were organized and selected for inclusion and what organizations or institutions that enacted the selection was, on the other hand, generally deemed to be of great importance for rendering the records of popular movement archives possible to interpret and use (R1–4; PMR1; DHS). Information detailing the relationship between the records in the digital archive and the totality of records in the archive holdings that the digital copies were drawn from was also understood to be very important so that users can know what records they can expect to find in the digital archive and what records they might have to access on-site in an archive (R1; R2; R4). Another pivotal facet, also with relevance for facilitating users understanding the contents of digital popular movement archives, is that information has to be made available detailing additional and planned ingestions of new records into the archive (R1, R4).

The seven focus groups additionally had item-level metadata needs. Researchers and PMR viewed archives and archival holdings to be interconnected and expressed the need for archive- and holding-level metadata to render networked features of archives and archival records useful to the maximum extent (R1–4; PMR1–2). Although having in part different archival interests and investments, these groups recognized that the records in digital popular movement archives can inform about and serve as entry points into also other types of archival records held by other archives. The focus group interviews also indicate that it would be useful for digital popular movement archives to communicate also about archives that have no tangible record- or holding-level relationships to themselves but exist within the same or a related domain (R3). Another instance of this ‘networked’ perspective on digital popular movement archives, expressed by researchers and the PMR, is that they perceive a need to tie the professional expertise of archivists into digital popular movement archives via holding-level metadata. What archivists know is considered to be indispensable in facilitating finding and using records, and the main role of digital popular movement archives is principally to allow the user to formulate more informed questions and inquiries when consulting available repositories and their staff of archivists (R1; R3; TUP1). In the same vein, it was suggested in the focus group interviews that it would be useful for digital popular movement archives to connect to the organizational metadata (finding aids and metadata schemas) of different popular movement repositories, as this would allow their users to access the human resources and records available in affiliated holdings and not just those directly involved in the digital archives (R4).

## Discussion

The findings nuance and provide new information about user needs regarding digital popular movement archives. Concerning the nature of the studied archive, this study shows how the Swedish popular movement archives are characterizable as community archives with a

pronounced mandate to reach out to their communities and extend their ambit beyond professional and amateur researchers. However, at the same time, they are custodial archival institutions with a strong mandate to preserve and keep physical documents.<sup>126</sup>

The findings show how needs often focus on archives and archival records rather than technology (the digital archive). Needs also tend to extend beyond accessing records to diverse information, management, social, personal, and technology-related wants and wishes. Furthermore, some of the needs – typically that of accessing records – are more central to the users than others. In parallel, the findings show how the purpose of using a digital archive and expertise in the context within which it is used rather than, for example, membership in a specific group is central to how user needs evolve.

Unsurprisingly, many of the individual needs identified in the analyzed focus group interviews parallel with those of earlier investigations of user needs of digital archives and libraries. The focus group participants called for intuitive and easy to use finding aids and functions<sup>127</sup> and help in orienting in the archive, what is available and excluded.<sup>128</sup> Also, the experienced usefulness of searching full-text in a digital archive and the difficulty to know if the search has been comprehensive parallel with earlier observations.<sup>129</sup>

#### *Users have multiple types of needs relating to archive and digital technology*

Comparably to how the earlier literature has identified a range of motivations to use archives and cultural collections,<sup>130</sup> the present findings point to a diversity of potential needs relating to a particular digital archive. The analysis of the focus group discussions showed particularly how: (1) many of the user needs focus on archives and archival records rather than technology (the digital archive) and (2) they extend to a variety of information, management, social, personal, and technology-related wants and wishes beyond accessing records.

First, many of the *user needs focus on archives and archival records rather than technology*. While the findings show that digital technology can empower users to approach and exploit archival holdings in new ways in comparison to a paper archive, user needs focus on understanding records, and how they are organized rather than the technology itself. This corresponds with earlier observations that users tend to be more interested in records than record catalogues,<sup>131</sup> even if records often are in different ways enmeshed in archives management systems and practices to an extent that accessing and using a record requires a thorough understanding of how archives are managed.<sup>132</sup> While the focus group participants acknowledged the usefulness of thematic subject indexes and automatic subject indexing, they were critical of their shortcomings and generally highlighted the usefulness of traditional archival search facilities.<sup>133</sup> Only the interviewed DHSs expressed direct interest to digital archival infrastructure. For others, the technology was clearly of secondary interest. This difference can possibly be explained by the different roles accessing the archives played in the work practices of the interviewed user groups. Researchers and PMRs are principally interested in the content of records, while DHSs more often engage with digital archives as a repository to be mined and extracted for data. It serves as a facilitator, and as some interviews showed, it also as a possible hindrance. For example, the system might turn to a barrier if it hides the context and archival order of records and does not help users to understand what kinds of records they are interacting with, what is their archival and organizational context, how they are linked to other records and activities, and what material is available and unavailable online and in the physical archive.

Second, the findings show that *user needs diverge, overlap, and extend beyond accessing records to diverse information, management, social, personal, and technology-related wants and wishes*. The analysis shows that an archive can fulfill, and a digital archive can facilitate, and a

range of different needs are only partly related to information retrieval and knowledge making. In an earlier study, Gilliland and McKemmish<sup>134</sup> identified record-keeping rather than information needs as a key reason of working with a community archive. In the present study, especially for the PMRs, the keeping of records and making them available appeared to have intrinsic value in serving identity and memory needs of the popular movement community.<sup>135</sup> In contrast, the researchers and especially DHSs tended to be more instrumental in how they approached the digital archive for the purposes of accessing records and information. The personal and social non-informational-related needs were perhaps most explicitly discussed when the interviewees noted that the user interface needs to give a professional impression and reflect the visual tradition of the popular movement.

Third, the findings point also to *hierarchies between individual needs*. The discussion to what extent the digital archive should support thematic searching points to that the primary need of many focus group participants was to access particular records rather than to use the system to retrieve specific information. The focus group interviews showed also that different types of tasks are associated with different technical needs regarding the digital infrastructure of the archive. PMRs who were proficient with the organization, terminology, and documents in the archive expressed a preference to browsing document titles and graphic representations of the records. Researchers used the interface more for retrieving specific material they needed for later use. Comparably, the PMRs and qualitative researchers asked for a facility to download individual documents, whereas DHSs called for a functionality to sample and download larger corpuses of data based on formal parameters.

*Contexts of user needs: Purposes and uses, archive and digital archive, disciplinary background, and expertise*

A parallel observation to the apparent multiplicity of user needs is their contextuality. The findings partly align with and partly extend observations in the literature. We found that (1) the needs are underpinned by the purposes and uses of the digital archive rather than users' group membership, (2) there is a tension between using an archive and a digital archive, (3) disciplinary background of the users has indirect influence in their needs, and (4) that contextual expertise influences both content-related and technical needs. These facets differ to a certain extent from how earlier research has categorized users of cultural heritage collections and their needs according to their level of expertise, information behaviors and information needs, and motivations.<sup>136</sup> Expertise is a factor that applies to all facets, whereas information behaviors and information needs unfold as a sub-facet of purposes and uses (facet 1 above). Motivations relate both to explicit purposes and uses (1), teleological ideas emerging from the disciplinary background of users (2), and the need itself.

First, *a crucial conceptual facet of user needs is that for what purpose and how a digital archive is used in practice*. The findings confirm earlier remarks on how categorizing users is difficult.<sup>137</sup> Similarly to how Cortada<sup>138</sup> underlines the parallels between how amateur and professional historians work, the present findings highlight how researchers, DHSs and PMRs, despite differences, often had similar needs and ways of working with archival material. Studies of archival engagement with diverse groups of users by Agosti and Orio<sup>139</sup> and Borlund and colleagues<sup>140</sup> provide similar evidence. Rather than group membership, in the present material, much of the variety could be traced back to differences in the tasks and purposes of using the archive the users described. For example, doing research on the historical context of popular movement initiatives implied party different needs than using the archive for administrative decision support. The diverging needs for metadata and process information suggest of the same. Such information is generally useful when needed for understanding the archive and its contents but whether such information is required depends on the task in hand. For some

tasks, it might be enough to trust on an archival institution and the adequacy of its digitization process, while sometimes more specific, for example, technical information might be needed.

Second, *there is an evident conflict and complementarity between archives and digital archives in how a digital archive can both facilitate and impede access to the archive and its contents.* Both researchers and PMRs who were well-versed in how archives and the popular movement are organized emphasized that a digital archive works best if it supports accessing archives from the premises of how archives are organized in general. In contrast, DHSs, who clearly were less literate in archival concepts, approached the digital archive more as an information retrieval system or a digital repository. A digital archive could, however, in both cases support users in their needs, especially by providing options to download material for qualitative and quantitative processing on a personal workstation and for exploring links between different records in the archive.

Third, *while the earlier studies suggest<sup>141</sup> that an abstract group membership might not correspond with how a user is using a digital archive, the present findings show that it can provide indications of their members' disciplinary backgrounds, teleological presuppositions, epistemic settings, and assumptions of how the digital archive is organized and approachable.* For example, historians tended to want to see the original documents and PMRs organizational information, and DHSs want API:s and advanced export and processing options. Correspondingly, historians conceptualize the archive from the perspective of a historical continuum, popular movement representants from the outset of the organization of the popular movement, and DHSs as data.

Fourth and finally, the present findings show clearly how *contextual expertise is a fundamental underpinning of what the focus group participants found useful and necessary.* Similar to how earlier research<sup>142</sup> has distinguished expert and non-expert users and identified that they tend to have diverging needs and preferences, the present findings evince of the same. The focus group participants were explicitly referring to the need of simple interface functions for novices and more conceptually more advanced and technically powerful options, respectively, for subject and technology experts. The emphasis on the importance of knowing records-keeping traditions and preference of structuring also a digital archive from such premises rather than thematically evinces of the perceived significance of disciplinary epistemic knowledge. In this sense, the attitudes of the focus group participants align with the values of discipline-specific humanities researchers rather than scientists or social scientists<sup>143</sup> or interdisciplinary researchers who tend to have greater demand for explicit secondary documentation.<sup>144</sup> However, the findings also exemplify how users are sometimes able to compensate for their eventual lack of proficiency in archival terminology<sup>145</sup> and management traditions by their organizational or technical knowledge on the record-keeping entity or the digital archive.

## Conclusions

This study shows that digital archive users' needs focus on archives and archival records rather than using the digital archive, and the reasons for accessing a digital archive are broader than merely retrieving information. Furthermore, it was possible to identify hierarchies between individual needs. Some needs, typically accessing records, are more central to the users than others. The findings also show how the purpose of using a digital archive and expertise in the context within which it is used is central to how user needs evolve. A key implication of the apparent complexity of user needs and their underpinnings is to acknowledge the limitations of what Bailey-Ross<sup>146</sup> has criticized as assigning users in broad segments and the resulting abstract categories of user behaviors. While a digital archive can, without much doubt, support a variety of users even if some of their needs are in conflict with each other,<sup>147</sup> we suggest that rather than attempting to address a selection of discrete

outspoken needs, it is more important to be aware of what different expectations and understandings of archives and digital infrastructures together imply for the design of a particular digital archive as whole. The different purposes of using archives for knowledge, meaning, and decision-making; framings of an archive as a repository of records, information, or data; or different understandings of what a digital infrastructure should do, how it should work, and, for instance, what is meant by being able to download something all have consequences. Rather than assuming that a digital archive is a generic information system, it can be more useful to conceptualize functionalities on the basis of how users' are accessing the archive, for example, as downloadable data, browsable collection of visually recognizable documents, information source, or a body of records from a specific activity. Similar to how Bailey-Ross<sup>148</sup> underlines the importance of nuancing the understanding of users and how Mattock and Bettine<sup>149</sup> argue for a similar point in relation to the different types of community archives, we posit that it is equally important to be aware and explicit about what kind of an archive a popular movement archive is for its different users and uses, and when developing a digital archive, what kind of an archive a particular digital popular movement archive is aiming to be and for whom.

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## REFLECTION ARTICLE

## Reflecting on the Place of Regional University Libraries and Archival Collections

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**Abstract**

University archives sit in a unique space within the Australian archives landscape, with many serving a dual purpose. Archives may be collected and maintained as the historical memory of an institution. Others also act as archives for their local community or the state. Most Australian universities have a dedicated archive, and the Australian Society of Archivists (2024) has a Special Interest Group devoted to the sector (see Appendix 1). This paper reflects on some of the different models offered at regional universities. As members of the Regional Universities Network, they share a particular context; each institution is committed to the broader community and serves the research and teaching purposes required in their establishment. Echoing early research on Australian university archives, however, there are marked differences in their approaches to managing archives, different functions and strategic alignment and diverse organisational arrangements.<sup>1</sup> Prompted by the initiative to develop a university archive at Southern Cross University, we would like to reflect on the strengths and challenges, limitations and possibilities of different models, how each archive relates to the business of the university, and echoing Boadle, to ask whether they function as a community or university resource.<sup>2</sup> Centring the place of regional universities, this paper also allowed us to collaborate and traverse the boundaries between our institutions and within them, as well as between the university and community.

**Keywords:** *University archives; Regional universities; Community.*

University archives are collected and maintained as the historical memory of an institution, which arguably reflects aspects of the regional community history. Some also act as archives for their local community and Museums of History New South Wales. There has not been a substantial survey of Australian university archives since Allen's research in the 1980s and Boadle's survey a decade later, which found a lack of consistency in function, in managing archives, their organisational structure and funding.<sup>3</sup> A desktop survey of current institutional archives suggests this is still the case. The formation of a university archive at Southern Cross University (SCU) provides an opportunity to explore the place of regional

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university libraries in local communities. The University of Southern Queensland shares a similar commitment to its local community and established its archive in 2006. The differences between university archives raise questions for further research and highlight the value of collaboration.

### Context

The University of New England (UNE) began as Australia's first regional university when it was formed in 1954. The UNE Archives and Heritage Centre is a repository for regional NSW State archival records and includes a New England regional collection and institutional archives. Charles Sturt University (CSU) traces its history to the establishment of the Bathurst Experimental Farm in 1895, and its various campuses were part of the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education before the incorporation of the university in 1989. Their archival collection reflects their status as a Regional Archives Centre for Museums of History NSW and their commitment to preserving and managing the historical records of the Riverina and Murray Regions. Federation University started as the School of Mines in Ballarat in 1869. Their historical collection is also closely aligned with their history and the region, including institutional records, the Geoffrey Blainey Mining Collection and the Creedy Economics Collection. SCU traces its history to the Lismore Teachers College, established in 1970. It was a College of Advanced Education until 1989, when it joined UNE as the Northern Rivers campus before becoming independent in 1994. The University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) was an Institute of Technology in 1967 and then an Institute of Advanced Education from 1971 to 1989. Central Queensland University (CQUni) also began as an Institute of Technology in 1967 and transformed into the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education in 1971. After the binary system was replaced in the late 1980s, SCU, CQUni and UniSQ became universities in the following decade, but the histories of their predecessor institutions are reflected in their collections and still resonate today. UniSQ has a professional archivist and Historical Archives, established as a project in the lead-up to the 40th anniversary of the University in 2006 and falls under Enterprise Information Management. Central Queensland, conversely, has a Records and Archives Office established as a division of the Library in 2003 following the introduction of the *Public Records Act 2002* (Qld) (J. Stehbins, personal communication 20 August 2023). SCU does not have a publicly accessible and searchable institutional archive. The Corporate Records Unit sits in Governance Services. The University of Sunshine Coast (UniSC) opened in 1996. The K'gari (Fraser Island) Research Archive is a special collection managed by the library.

All seven institutions are part of the Regional Universities Network (RUN). The RUN was formed in 2011 to provide advice to government, strengthen and promote the contributions of regional universities and build capacity and sustainability through the network.<sup>4</sup> Its work and existence affirm the unique place regional universities occupy in the tertiary sector in Australia. Outside of the seven institutions that are members of the RUN, with other regional institutions, that distinction is also recognised in Commonwealth reviews of higher education in Australia, which acknowledge the contributions they make to regional and national development (even while they seek remedies to common issues around their viability).<sup>5</sup> A summary of RUN university archives is provided in Table 1.

The member institutions of Queensland in the RUN, Central Queensland, Southern Queensland, Sunshine Coast and the UNE, like the metropolitan University of Sydney, have functions defined by their Acts related to 'community' generally. Other RUN partners, Charles Sturt and Federation Universities, like Southern Cross, include reference to the needs and aspirations of residents of the places they were established (regional Victoria, western and

*Table 1.* Summary of RUN university archives was from personal communication

| University | Structure                         | Regional                             | MoH NSW | Institutional | Leadership                   |
|------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|---------------|------------------------------|
| UNE        | Library                           | ✓                                    | ✓       | ✓             | Manager, Archivist           |
| CSU        | Library                           | ✓                                    | ✓       | ✓             | Manager, Archivist           |
| Federation | Library                           | ✓                                    | -       | ✓             | Curator                      |
| CQUni      | Library                           | -                                    | -       | ✓             | Senior Manager, Archivist    |
| UniSQ      | Enterprise Information Management | Japanese Garden, Toowoomba Chronicle | -       | ✓             | University Archivist         |
| SCU        | Library                           | Richmond River                       | -       | -             | Director, University Library |
| UniSC      | Library                           | K'Gari                               | -       | -             | Director, Library Services   |

UNE, University of New England; CQUni, Central Queensland University; UniSQ, University of Southern Queensland; SCU, Southern Cross University; UniSC, University of Sunshine Coast; RUN, Regional Universities Network.

south-western NSW and the needs of the North Coast region of the state, respectively). The Universities Accord final report described the role regional universities play in their local communities:

They are often the largest employer in their area. They provide facilities and essential infrastructure, foster community participation and connection through local sports and other sponsorships and can play an important role in times of crisis, as evidenced by examples of universities providing support to their communities during natural disasters such as cyclones, bushfires and floods.<sup>6</sup>

This raises the question of what role regional universities should play in preserving local history and what local histories are visible in the institution's archives. Regional historical societies and local government public libraries often serve as repositories for the histories of regional communities, preserving records that document the unique stories and experiences of that place. However, they are often run by volunteers and poorly resourced, providing scope for collaboration. Regional universities have long played a role as 'anchor institutions' in their communities, important to the wider community life of the towns and cities where they are headquartered.<sup>7</sup> This is reflected in their collections.

Nevertheless, universities that do not list a regional archive hold items that demonstrate the interconnections between the institution and community. The UniSQ Historical Archives have collections connected to the Toowoomba region, such as the *Chronicle* and the Japanese Garden Collection. The Garden was intended to provide a facility for students to learn about Asia and increase the cultural awareness of students and community. Initiated by Dr Adrian Allen, a Lecturer in Asian Studies, the Garden was built with the support and funding from the community. The collection includes planning development and construction records, plant listings and documents explaining the design and meaning of the plants. The University is the custodian of the Japanese Garden for the community. The campaign for a Teachers College in Lismore, launched in 1959, also provides a history of the region as much as it documents the institution. The establishment of the Aboriginal Institute of Community Education at the Northern Rivers Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) in 1977 is part of the history of SCU and the Bundjalung community, which initiated the development.

## Description

University archives are diverse in their collection policies, the professional profile of staff and the people to whom they report. They reflect the characteristics of their institutions, their communities, funding arrangements and resources, and the contemporary period in which they were established. This makes it challenging to compare different university archives and to draw conclusions about the sector. With some irony, the lack of standardisation is a global phenomenon university archives share in Australia.<sup>8</sup> University archives currently sit within the institution's library, enterprise or governance area. Individuals often initiated their development. As the foundation archivist at James Cook University lamented, 'so much [in universities] depends on individuals rather than the organisational structure. People can be convinced of the need to pursue certain goals but, if they leave, the negotiating has to begin all over again'.<sup>9</sup>

Fifteen of the 19 universities Nessy Allen surveyed in 1987 had formal archives.<sup>10</sup> CAE were excluded from the research, although some of these, such as the Riverina CAE, which became part of Charles Sturt University, had an established archive. All universities must meet standards for record management as a function of state and territory legislation and national information management legislation, but an archive is a deliberate choice. Archives are records selected for *ongoing* retention,<sup>11</sup> but the institutional memories enshrined in their collections can be shaped by curators and opportunism, community expectations and the interests of collectors.<sup>12</sup>

The establishment of archives in universities was related to their research and teaching functions and their responsibility to serve society, and these elements define the range of stakeholders as well as the information and knowledge university archives manage. The UNE and Charles Sturt have a regional repository established by the Archives Authority of New South Wales (now Museums of History), driven by their local communities who wanted to retain custody of 'what they regard as their cultural property'.<sup>13</sup>

The internal stakeholders of university archives are producers and consumers of the documents they hold – students, academic and administrative staff. UNE has a stakeholder engagement strategy, working directly with historians in the university to promote their collections for teaching. Newcastle, Melbourne and Deakin have formal programs that engage students with their collections.<sup>14</sup> UniSQ holds guided tours of the Historical Archives facilities for university staff, mounts exhibitions in the three campuses (Toowoomba, Ipswich and Springfield) and assists with researching material and mounting displays by request from faculties/departments for special occasions such as anniversaries. Their research enquiries are almost exclusively from university staff. UNE, UniSQ, CSU and Federation archives are also open to the public in separate facilities. CQUni and UniSQ access is by appointment, and the public can complete an onsite access form for UniSC materials that are not online. They each employ professional archivists.

SCU has not yet invested in a formal archive to preserve its history or the stories of the regions its campuses are located in. The Bachelor of Arts program, with its major in history, is now only available in a double degree with Education, and it is unlikely that students will be significant stakeholders of a university archive. In the aftermath of the 2022 Lismore floods, seed funding to create an online open-access repository for records related to the river was provided through a small internal grants scheme focused on recovery and resilience. Academic and library staff collaborated to build a repository of digital, historical information accessible for research and disaster planning during and following flooding events, with a focus on scientific, cultural and historical records.<sup>15</sup> The Richmond River Open Access Repository (RROAR) comes under the auspices of the university's Library as an emerging collection of significance for the university's community and regional engagement strategic priorities, with ongoing staff resourcing absorbed into the Library's operations. Governance of the repository

was established by introducing and implementing the *Library Archives Procedure*, and donation and digitisation agreement forms were developed, reviewed and approved by the University's Legal office. The successful establishment of the RROAR has demonstrated the purpose and benefit of archives as a university resource of value. When SCU celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2024, we began to revisit the need for an archive of historical items about the university itself, and work is currently underway to acquire, describe, store, digitise and preserve archival objects from the 50 years of the university and its predecessor institutions.

### Conclusion

The examples of other regional universities bring to light a series of issues that continue to differentiate university archives across Australia:

- Staffing and use of volunteers
- Collection focus: regional history and/or institutional archives
- Funding models and community grants
- Stakeholders
- Community expectations and aspirations
- Formal engagement with teaching program and research priorities
- The role of patronage

How university archives relate to the business of the university (teaching, research and records management) and perform a responsibility to community and local heritage is shaped by these factors and connections with other agencies relevant to local heritage. More research is needed to understand the contemporary state of university archives in Australia. We invite other university archivists to contact us to contribute to that research. In the meantime, our collaboration has provided a valuable learning opportunity, highlighting our collective need as regional practitioners to overcome professional and geographic isolation. While each university archive is different, we share similar challenges in managing collections with limited resources, finding engaging ways to connect with our communities to embed archives into our university's teaching, learning and research, and acknowledging and untangling the legacy of colonialism threaded throughout archival material. Understanding the constraints and possibilities of our work and strategies to deal with these has been supported through this reflection.

### Notes on contributors

Adele Wessell is an Associate Professor of History at SCU. She is a State Library of NSW Merewether Fellow (2024), undertaking a history of the Richmond River in Northern New South Wales. Adele is currently undertaking a Graduate Certificate in Digital Archives at Charles Sturt University.

Clare Thorpe is the Director, Library Services at SCU, a researcher-practitioner and a non-executive board director who has worked in academic and state libraries since 2001. Clare and Adele established the Richmond River Open Access Repository as a special collection within the university library, and both are working towards opening a university archive following the 30th anniversary of the founding of SCU.

Monica Casavieja Muniz has been the University Archivist at the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) since 2010. She has a degree in Archives Sciences from the University of the Republic (Uruguay, South America). After graduating, Monica worked as an Archivist for 10 years at the University Archives in the University of the Republic. She moved to Australia in 2006 and lived for 3 years in NSW. Monica is studying for a Master of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University.

## Notes

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**Appendix I.** Foundation dates of Universities and their archives

| University     | Archive | Webpage   |
|----------------|---------|---|
| Sydney         | 1850    | 1954 <a href="https://www.sydney.edu.au/archives/">https://www.sydney.edu.au/archives/</a>  |
| Melbourne      | 1853    | 1960 <a href="https://library.unimelb.edu.au/asc">https://library.unimelb.edu.au/asc</a>  |
| Adelaide       | 1874    | 1983 <a href="https://www.adelaide.edu.au/records/university-archives">https://www.adelaide.edu.au/records/university-archives</a>  |
| Tasmania       | 1890    | 1969 <a href="https://www.utas.edu.au/library/research/special-and-rare-collections">https://www.utas.edu.au/library/research/special-and-rare-collections</a>  |
| Queensland     | 1910    | 1982 <a href="https://web.library.uq.edu.au/collections/university-queensland-archives">https://web.library.uq.edu.au/collections/university-queensland-archives</a>  |
| WA             | 1911    | 1979 <a href="https://www.uwa.edu.au/library/Find-resources/Records-and-Archives">https://www.uwa.edu.au/library/Find-resources/Records-and-Archives</a>  |
| ANU            | 1946    | 1956 <a href="https://archives.anu.edu.au/">https://archives.anu.edu.au/</a>  |
| NSW            | 1949    | 1980 <a href="https://www.recordkeeping.unsw.edu.au/university-archives">https://www.recordkeeping.unsw.edu.au/university-archives</a>  |
| UNE            | 1954    | 1960 <a href="https://www.une.edu.au/library/visit-us/une-archives-and-heritage-centre">https://www.une.edu.au/library/visit-us/une-archives-and-heritage-centre</a>  |
| Monash         | 1958    | 1976 <a href="https://www.monash.edu/records-archives/archives">https://www.monash.edu/records-archives/archives</a>  |
| La Trobe       | 1964    | 1982 <a href="https://www.latrobe.edu.au/library/research-support/university-historical-archives">https://www.latrobe.edu.au/library/research-support/university-historical-archives</a>  |
| Macquarie      | 1964    | 1978 <a href="https://www.mq.edu.au/about/facilities/museums-collections">https://www.mq.edu.au/about/facilities/museums-collections</a>  |
| Newcastle      | 1965    | 1975 <a href="https://libguides.newcastle.edu.au/archives">https://libguides.newcastle.edu.au/archives</a>  |
| Flinders       | 1966    | 1986 <a href="https://library.flinders.edu.au/accessing-collections/special/flinders-university-archives-collection">https://library.flinders.edu.au/accessing-collections/special/flinders-university-archives-collection</a>                    |
| JCU            | 1970    | 1970 <a href="https://www.jcu.edu.au/chancellery/university-archives">https://www.jcu.edu.au/chancellery/university-archives</a>  |
| Griffith       | 1971    | 2012 <a href="https://griffitharchive.griffith.edu.au/">https://griffitharchive.griffith.edu.au/</a>  |
| Murdoch        | 1973    | 1975 <a href="https://www.murdoch.edu.au/library/resources/special-collections">https://www.murdoch.edu.au/library/resources/special-collections</a>  |
| Deakin         | 1974    | 1983 <a href="https://www.deakin.edu.au/library/use-our-libraries/asc/collections/archives">https://www.deakin.edu.au/library/use-our-libraries/asc/collections/archives</a>  |
| Wollongong     | 1975    | 1969 <a href="https://www.uow.edu.au/library/archives/">https://www.uow.edu.au/library/archives/</a>  |
| Curtin         | 1987    | 1967 <a href="https://www.curtin.edu.au/archives/">https://www.curtin.edu.au/archives/</a>  |
| Charles Darwin | 1988    | 2022? <a href="https://digitalcollections.cdu.edu.au/">https://digitalcollections.cdu.edu.au/</a>   |
| QUT            | 1988    | 2014? <a href="https://digitalcollections.qut.edu.au/">https://digitalcollections.qut.edu.au/</a>   |
| UTS            | 1988    | 2008? <a href="https://www.uts.edu.au/about/uts-governance/records-and-archives">https://www.uts.edu.au/about/uts-governance/records-and-archives</a>   |
| WSU            | 1989    | 1991 <a href="https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/rams/archives">https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/rams/archives</a>  |
| CSU            | 1990    | 1973 <a href="https://library.csu.edu.au/archives/home">https://library.csu.edu.au/archives/home</a>  |
| Canberra       | 1990    | ? <a href="https://www.canberra.edu.au/policies/PolicyProcedure/Index/1597">https://www.canberra.edu.au/policies/PolicyProcedure/Index/1597</a>   |
| ACU            | 1991    | ?   |
| Edith Cowan    | 1991    | 1983 <a href="https://www.ecu.edu.au/centres/library-services/services-and-facilities/archives">https://www.ecu.edu.au/centres/library-services/services-and-facilities/archives</a>  |
| UniSA          | 1991    | 1997 <a href="https://guides.library.unisa.edu.au/specialandarchivalcollections/">https://guides.library.unisa.edu.au/specialandarchivalcollections/</a>  |
| CQUni          | 1992    | 2003 <a href="https://www.cqu.edu.au/about-us/cquniversity-archives">https://www.cqu.edu.au/about-us/cquniversity-archives</a>  |
| RMIT           | 1992    | 2021 <a href="https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-heritage/rmit-archives-collection">https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-heritage/rmit-archives-collection</a>  |
| Swinburne      | 1992    | 2004 <a href="https://commons.swinburne.edu.au/hierarchy.do?topic=d8f0565e-17b0-403b-88b1-b68fdf5a0fce">https://commons.swinburne.edu.au/hierarchy.do?topic=d8f0565e-17b0-403b-88b1-b68fdf5a0fce</a>  |
| UniSQ          | 1992    | 2006 <a href="https://www.unisq.edu.au/about-unisq/values-culture/history">https://www.unisq.edu.au/about-unisq/values-culture/history</a>  |
| Victoria       | 1992    | 1992 <a href="https://libraryguides.vu.edu.au/vu-archives">https://libraryguides.vu.edu.au/vu-archives</a>  |
| SCU            | 1994    | *   |
| Federation     | 1992    | ? <a href="https://victoriancollections.net.au/organisations/federation-university-historical-collection#collection-records">https://victoriancollections.net.au/organisations/federation-university-historical-collection#collection-records</a> |
| UniSC          | 1999    | * <a href="https://www.usc.edu.au/library/collections">https://www.usc.edu.au/library/collections</a>   |

\*No university archive? Unknown at time of submission.