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Indigenous Knowledge and Archives: accessing hidden history and understandings

Introduction

Over the past decade, I have been involved with numerous archival projects. All of these have had as their primary aim the uncovering of aspects of Indigenous history or culture. In each case, I had assumed that the archival knowledge I would uncover was not Indigenous *per se* but rather was Western or colonial knowledge about Indigenous people and their cultures. This material was, for the most part, I had understood, the results of the surveillance of Indigenous people and their cultures. In short, these were archival texts within which Indigenous people were the object (and subject) of the gaze of colonial authorities and 'experts,' and from which Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and voice were excluded.

In this paper, I interrogate this assumption and consider some of the issues that have arisen in using archives for the creation of Indigenous (or hidden) histories. I begin by establishing how I conceptualise Indigenous knowledge for the purposes of my argument in this paper. This is followed by an analysis of two case studies, one a project that was both familial and personal and the other an exploration of ethnographical details related to Indigenous people's understandings of weather and climate. I focus on some of the challenges each has presented and discuss how these have led me to develop a set of ideals which would enable archives and libraries to allow additions to the Indigenous records (and knowledge) housed in their collections. In the last part of the paper, I highlight and discuss an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project I am involved with. My hope is that some of my concerns and the issues I broach below will be dealt with in this project which we entitled Trust and Technology.1

Indigenous knowledge

It has become increasingly popular to refer to the concept of Indigenous Knowledge as distinct and separate from Western knowledge. This separation and what is often perceived as an incompatibility have been discussed at length by educationalists, anthropologists and philosophers and theorists alike.2 However, as Donna Haraway reminds us, such perceived differences are perhaps rather arbitrary, as Western knowledge and science in particular 'is above all a story telling practice'.3 Contemporary interest in Indigenous Knowledge is in part a result of global and local political engagements which have situated Indigenous issues and rights as a feature of human rights discourse and also a consequence of renewed interest in Indigenous cultures which stem from the neo-primitivist new age movements. In this context the term Indigenous Knowledge is frequently used interchangeably with traditional knowledge. According to Warren, in a definition adopted largely by the United Nations and UNESCO:

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is… local knowledge - knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. [It] contrasts with the international knowledge system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms. It is the basis for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities.4

Using this definition, we would not expect archives to house Indigenous Knowledge as Indigenous Knowledge is '[t]raditional knowledge [that] is generally transmitted orally and experientially and not written'5. However, using a definition supplied by Flavier et al., we might consider that information housed in archives can function as Indigenous Knowledge, as it 'facilitates communication and decision-making'.6 This particular definition depends on and recognizes that Indigenous societies and cultures are utterly modern: they are dynamic and adaptive.

For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term Indigenous Knowledge in its broadest sense. Indeed, I am interested in any information, textual or other, that is housed within public, private or state archives, libraries or other institutions, which observes, and records Indigenous activities, and or people. This is not immediately or obviously Indigenous Knowledge as it is knowledge not *by* but rather *about* Indigenous people. As most historians would agree these archival records are at least as informative for what they reveal about the record makers as they are for any 'knowledge' contained within them. Therefore, while I do not believe that the material housed in archives and libraries in general is Indigenous Knowledge *per se*, such material can become Indigenous through reclamation processes which can be facilitated by libraries and archives and which, I believe, will bring the two parties closer together.

Case Study One: Looking for, finding and reclaiming Emily

Accessing private and confidential knowledge

There is an inextricable link between identity and culture and access to knowledge. As the colonial process has effectively fragmented many Indigenous families and they have on occasion been denied access to their cultural knowledge, many have turned to the materials housed in archives and libraries, relevant to their own histories and such. For a number of years, I worked with elders assisting them to retrieve some of the fragments of their heritage housed in various archives. It was with this experience behind me that I began to search in earnest for any records pertaining to my Aboriginal great-grandmother, Emily. Like many family historians (even those of us who are also professionally trained), I had a few leads, the most important of which was the essential clue that she had been committed to a mental asylum at some time in the 1920s or 30s. I was able to locate and extract from numerous archives, medical records, police records, welfare records and even school records and so on. Most of these records were housed in government archives, the public record office of Victoria, the mental health archives, police and welfare agency records and so on. The result of this work was the book *A Little Bird Told Me*7, and much more importantly a deeper and

more nuanced understanding of the Indigenous heritage and knowledge of my family. I learnt first hand that inextricable link between identity and culture, and that access to knowledge presented very particular problems and created a very specific and often times conflicted relationship between me and the archival materials.

The raw material I drew on for developing Emily's biographical narrative consisted of boxes of hospital records, a photograph of Emily in hospital garb and a series of psychiatric evaluation sheets. Added to this were the weekly letters that Emily's husband wrote to the asylum authorities, the requests for visits.

My grandmother also kept a small private archive which consisted of birth, death and marriage certificates, some of which had been altered, and a short abstracted memoir. In her memoir, Nana focused on her childhood, providing very little detail that could help me in my quest. As a supplement to the hospital records and my grandmother's sanitised memoir, I conducted a series of interviews with those who could remember Emily, including my own parents, my aunt and several of my grandmother's distant cousins. This was my introduction to working in the perilous world of memory and oral history.

Archival resources

Medical records tend to be poorly written, barely legible and highly cryptic. They are, however, remarkable sources of information and the archives are often a rich and untapped source of material. Dashed off notes, hurriedly scribbled instructions and scarcely decipherable observations indicate that the medical staff was extremely overworked. On some occasions patients had to be kept indoors or restrained simply for lack of staff. Sedation was frequently used and it would appear that for many a patient the first few weeks of their stay was spent in a near unconscious state. Despite my professional training as an historian, I was deeply affected by this material. As the granddaughter of the subject of these records, I was often visibly and palpably distressed.

After hundreds of hours reading doctors' notebooks, diaries and case histories, I developed a sense of the mental health system in the early part of last century. The mental health archives are housed on the grounds of the Royal Park Psychiatric Institution. The archives hold published and unpublished materials. I was able to locate doctors' notebooks and attendants' ward records. The medical records revealed that Emily was institutionalised for what the medical authorities described as 'auditory hallucinations'. Emily herself, according to the doctor's notes, called these the voices of the spirits. Therefore, while we can not really call the patient and welfare records Indigenous as such, it is clear that Indigenous Knowledge can be found within them. This material has been subsequently reclaimed and is now presumed to be Indigenous by family members.

Access to this material varied. Individual patient records cannot be enabled unless the patient was a family member, or was born more than 100 years ago. On this latter point I was deeply concerned. For many Aboriginal families, 100 years is not a long time–four, maybe five, generations–and I am certain that many (maybe most) would not want this material on open

access for anyone to read. Even in 500 years, I do not want just anyone to be able to read the 'treatments' to which members of my family were subjected.

The records on inmates, be these asylum or jail records, along with protector's records, mission records, welfare records and so on are records of *surveillance*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines surveillance as:

Watch or guard kept over a person, etc., esp. over a suspected person, a prisoner, or the like; often, spying, supervision; less commonly, supervision for the purpose of *direction* or *control*, superintendence [my emphasis].8

The status I am ascribing this material, that is 'surveillance' records is very important. Over a number of years I have accompanied Aboriginal elders to archives, public records offices and the like, and have often seen firsthand the sort of trauma these records can produce. People are confused as to why their families who were sometimes living perfectly 'normal', even suburban, lives were subjected to the shadowy observation of police and welfare agencies alike.

According to the definitions presented earlier, these records can not be routinely described as Indigenous Knowledge. However, as this information is incorporated into a community or family's world view it becomes Indigenous Knowledge and is factored into decisions made and choices exerted. Emily, once thought of by family members as troubled and possibly mentally ill is now reconfigured as an Aboriginal woman who talked to her spirits and her *Wotjabaluk* ancestors, who had practiced, and now through archival research had passed on (some) of her Indigenous cultural knowledge.

Implications for Libraries and Archives

Clearly, there are policy and practical implications for libraries and archives and, in most archives I have worked, attempts are made to meet these challenges. Most archives and repositories have an Aboriginal policy document (usually developed with considerable community input) and, in general, most staff are sensitive to the issues. Although policy or protocols make a difference and help provide guidelines for practice, it is clear that there are no blanket solutions that will meet all circumstances.

In some locations, Indigenous people have been employed as liaison officers or facilitators. This is not necessarily the answer for everyone, as I have been in situations where particularly private elders have expressly requested that they do not deal with an Aboriginal person, even an archivist or librarian, as they felt 'shamed' and preferred to deal with a complete stranger. Although I would not suggest censorship, I have at times needed to proceed with great caution warning people that there could be extremely unpleasant information that they may choose not to see. I have encountered records where the forced sterilisation of Aboriginal women is described and documented, and for some particularly elderly individuals this was not something they wished to see. In these cases I have found it is always better to take more than one person/ family member to the repository so that these issues can be discussed and no one person feels pressured to view distressing material.

Finally, once families become aware that material is available, there is often a strong desire for that material to be destroyed–a desire that is clearly at odds with the charter of the archive or library. This is a very sensitive issue and one which I believe needs to be fully discussed and mechanisms developed for either restricting access to the material or alternately enabling Indigenous people the right of reply. Recently, I discovered a police welfare report relating to my grandmother and her capacity as a parent. Some of the information was wrong and other aspects of it were at least in need of modification. At a minimum I wanted a right of reply. On this latter point, which I will develop further in my next case study, I suggest that archives and libraries embrace the new digital technologies and provide the opportunity for interactive and performative interventions.

Case Study Two: The preliminary Indigenous Weather knowledge project

Accessing ethnographic knowledge in the public domain

In 2000, I began a project, along with the Bureau of Meteorology (Victoria) and Professor Nigel Tapper of Monash University's School of Geography and Environmental Science, on Indigenous Understandings of Weather and Climate. As a prelim to a large ARC Linkage application, we developed a pilot desktop study to ascertain the viability of the project. The Bureau of Meteorology was particularly keen to develop a series of seasonal calendars for their website. In order to ensure we achieved a comprehensive pilot which would outline the possibilities of a large-scale continent-wide project, we needed to ensure that we limited ourselves to publicly available materials.

Several issues arose in the preliminary project and now two years into the larger project we continue to confront these. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it has become abundantly clear that just because material is in the public domain its status as 'public' and therefore open to use is not certain. To their great credit, the Bureau staff was keen to fully and adequately acknowledge the communities whose knowledge was to be placed on their website.9 This meant that we needed to check with those communities from which the information or knowledge had come. This ensured that we had community consent to allow us to publish images or information. Interestingly, in many cases the Indigenous community concerned did not even know that the material existed in the public arena, as it had been secured by external people (anthropologists, ethnographers and other visitors) often without the knowledge or contemporary memory of the elders. Thus the intellectual property rights of the community, which we were concerned to protect had already been violated.

The next key concern that we encountered and continue to grapple with concerns the irreconcilable nature of Indigenous knowledge vis-à-vis Western knowledge. We faced what we now recognise and label 'irreconcilable ontologies'., following the conceptual work of Turnbull.10 At a crude level, Western science and climatological studies are based on recognition of certain cycles of certain lengths, certain numbers of seasons and so on. Indigenous weather and climate knowledge is then collected and place in juxtaposition to, or more often subordinate, to Western knowledge. These two knowledge systems, rather than

having equal value are hierarchised. This is necessary in order to produce the seasonal calendars which the Bureau wanted for their webpage. Such calendars are, on reflection, incommensurate with traditional understandings of the environment.

A Bureau of Meteorology webpage which relates to *Wantangka* season of the *Walabunnba* people of Central Australia provides an example for discussion.11 After consultation with the knowledgeable Aboriginal women, Lana, Rachel, Pansy, Trisha and Lindy, all family members of the Walya Altjerre Aboriginal Corporation, the decision was made to share cultural knowledge. In this case, the community were not asked to develop a new seasonal calendar but rather to verify and given permission to use the *Walabunnba* seasonal calendar as developed by the Bureau of Meteorology. The substance of the calendar was already preconfigured and constructed out of archival materials located in the public domain. The community is described as having two seasons. The first of which is *Wantangka* or as the webpage describes it 'hot weather'. The webpage lists the following:

October to March

The hot weather (summer) called Wantangka gradually gets hotter so we know to be ready for high temperatures, bush fires and rains. A variety of different bush foods become available and certain animals are ready to eat.

The Bush Plum is found around Central Australia in the hot weather (summer). The Bush Plum is not a traditional Dreaming unlike Bush Banana or Bush Potato. We eat the plum straight off the bush when it is dark. It is sweet to taste.

… We share a ceremony which is held during the hot weather.

The grass is burnt after the rains which is the end of the hot weather. The burning helps the bush foods to grow again.

There are several interventions in the text of this that suggest the incommensurable nature of the different knowledge systems. One is the use of the terms October to March as markers of the beginning and end of the 'season'. This is an imposition, a Western intervention that undermines the value of the Indigenous knowledge. In fact *Wantangka* begins when it begins, and ends when it ends, at different times every cycle. The insertion of the word 'summer' in parenthesis further demonstrates how the Indigenous knowledge is being made to be subservient to and simultaneously subsumed within the Western knowledge system.

Whilst my concerns here are easily trivialized by arguing that we are never able to overcome these problems, I think that such an argument is perhaps unnecessarily pessimistic and simplistic. Two issues which emerged in this project and which could not be put aside were Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights over material in the public domain and 'incommensurable ontologies'.

Implications for Libraries and Archives

It has become increasingly clear that some communities do not know (or perhaps no longer remember) that there is material in the public domain relevant to their culture, history and

region, and that some of this knowledge is traditional Indigenous Knowledge. The preliminary Indigenous weather knowledge (desktop) project highlighted this very clearly. Firstly, the information in the public domain was probably collected a long time ago and, secondly, as is often the case, there was little or no follow up so that the communities involved did not know what had been produced out of the sharing of their cultural knowledge. As far as the various archives were concerned, the copyright rested with the creators of the records and not the Indigenous knowledge holders. Institutional-based researchers bound by ethics committees and ethical practice policies are frequently reminded that they need to liaise with the relevant communities and so forth, however this is not a usual requirement if the material is deemed to be in the public domain. Indeed, many researchers assume that public domain material is open for all and as such there is no need to consider the copyright (apart from adequate acknowledgement). As a result of this attitude, the moral rights of the material's owners are rarely even considered.

Libraries and archives as holders of, or repositories for, material with significant Indigenous content need to be cognisant of these issues and I suggest a simple document or webpage that indicates that if archival material which might be deemed to be Indigenous knowledge is to be published, in electronic or other formats, that every attempt be made to consult with and obtain permission of the relevant community. Anything less is simply bad manners.

The other aspect of this project that I would like to consider in terms of its implications for libraries and archives is that of competing knowledge systems or, as I labelled these before, 'incommensurate ontologies'. This is also relevant to my previous discussion about the need for Aboriginal people to be able to add to records, correct information and in general offer alternate interpretations or context.

As noted above, drawing on the work of Flavier and others, Indigenous knowledge is often oral knowledge or at least knowledge that is often delivered in oral form. The Indigenous weather knowledge project has highlighted for me that the creation and passing on of Indigenous knowledge is something that happens within a culture and therefore is both performative and interactive. Converting this knowledge into text or some other inactive medium basically and perhaps even fundamentally changes the information. As Walter Ong reflects:

> Without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing.… There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living.12

I am not as pessimistic as Ong. Given the proliferation of digital technologies, it is increasingly likely that archives and libraries will be able to offer the opportunity to incorporate oral material into their collections in new and clever ways. How then do we incorporate oral culture without

contributing to its death, to use Ong's terms, and all the while keeping in mind that Indigenous heritage is fragile but living heritage.

Trust and Technology: Building archival systems for Indigenous oral memory

The background to the project

This project has three broad and interrelated phases. We are at present in the primary data gathering phase or the 'user needs analysis' and about to begin phase two. We began by recognising that traditionally in pre-contact times Aboriginal Australia was mainly an oral culture. We also noted the passing of information from one generation to the next was achieved by harnessing memories and the story-telling associated with them. This ensured that cultural knowledge was transmitted and younger generations knew what was important to know. Finally, we noted that the importance of oral tradition continues to underwrite much Aboriginal culture. For the purposes of the ARC linkage application we used the term 'oral memory' as a short-hand reference to historical knowledge that has been transmitted orally across the generations. As a consequence of colonisation, dispossession, removal and the relentless surveillance to which Indigenous people were subjected many significant records about Indigenous communities reside in institutions such as libraries, public record offices and other archives. These are virtually all written records and not oral memory.

One of the key motivations in the Trust and Technology project was to offer Aboriginal people the opportunity to incorporate their oral memories into archival institutions. Importantly we are *not* collecting oral traditions, stories, memories or any other form of Indigenous Knowledge. Instead, we are in the first instance asking Indigenous people how and *if* they would like their material represented and delivered. This forms our user needs analysis and, based on the outcomes of this phase, we will explore a range of archival techniques and technology to build an archival system that provides access to oral memory. We certainly hope that such a system will also enable Aboriginal people to add to records already housed in archives and libraries and thus value add to existing records.

Whilst we are focusing oral material, stories and the like, we anticipate that the project's outcomes will play a fundamental role in building trust and understanding between archival institutions and Indigenous communities. This is something that my experience to date would suggest is lacking, not withstanding the goodwill that exists on both sides of the divide. The key aims of the project were developed by bringing together a multidisciplinary group consisting of historian, archival specialists, Aboriginal scholars and a community liaison and expert in community protocols.

Although it is undoubtedly early days for this research, we anticipate a number of significant outcomes and benefits for archives and libraries, Aboriginal communities, and the relationships between the two. A key benefit will be an increased enabling of access to oral materials that have been previously unavailable. Such access we hope will aid the process of recovery for Indigenous people affected by past and ongoing government decisions and

policies. This will hopefully promote the healing of family and community ties and make an important contribution to national efforts of reconciliation.

The *trust* aspect of the project will be developed and attempted through a consistent and sincere effort to consult, co-operate and collaborate with Indigenous communities. It is essential for relationship building that the Indigenous community is a crucial and inalienable part of the decision-making process with regard to how their oral traditions and memories should be handled. The comprehensive exploration of the needs of Indigenous users of archival services will develop understandings on both sides and enable models for archival strategies and services for Indigenous communities that are driven by their needs. There will also be significant benefit for Industry partners who have all striven to work ethically and respectfully with the relevant Aboriginal community groups. All anticipate improved service delivery which we hope will filter through to the archival community in general.

First peoples in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America along with many other Indigenous peoples face similar issues relating to access to, and control of, information about their cultures and communities. One of the main benefits of this project will be the provision of a model for archives around the world to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Indigenous owners and custodians. Other benefits of the project as we see it are:

- Aboriginal people in regional and rural Victoria will have increased access to oral materials relevant to their communities, and communities will be supported to develop collections housed locally if they so desire.

- Archives, libraries and other record-holding agencies will develop culturally appropriate access to their collections for Indigenous people. This will extend and go vastly beyond existing procedures and policies.

- New collections of oral materials may (if communities so desire) be developed through the systematic capture and preservation of representations of Indigenous stories and memories which will lead to an accumulation of valued heritage.

- Trust will be built between the Indigenous communities of Victoria and archival service providers. This trust will both be the foundation for and ensure the security, authenticity and integrity of memory and knowledge captured in physical form.

- The best methods of capturing and preserving representations of oral memory for long periods of time will be investigated. This will involve innovative deployment of culturally sensitive metadata schema, and the development of customised and user friendly interfaces.

The Trust and Technology project builds on the experiences of the chief and partner investigators. For my part, I hope that my involvement might enable the production of solutions to some of the issues I have encountered as an archival historian undertaking a range of projects which have included those outlined above. My key concern, as I have observed, is to create archival systems to which Indigenous people and Indigenous

knowledge can be interactively added. Perhaps we might even develop systems that not merely acknowledge the inherently different nature of Indigenous knowledge but celebrate the ontological incommensurability of various knowledge systems and work towards making the two systems at least comprehensible and of equal value.

Notes

1 Industry partners include: the Public Records Office of Victoria, the Koorie Heritage Trust, the Australian Society of Archivists Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group and the Victorian Koorie Records Taskforce. Academic partners include: School of Information Management Systems and the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University. I would like to acknowledge and thank my fellow researchers for permission to discuss this project before the release of findings. I am grateful to fellow CIs Graeme Johanson, Sue McKemmish, Don Schauder and former CI Kirsty Williamson. I also show appreciation to others involved: Shannon Faulkhead, Justine Heazlewood, Carol Jackway, Fiona Ross, Jen Sullivan, Diane Singh, Emma Toon and Andrew Waugh.

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