Gaps in the descriptive metadata of our national memory: digital engagement with colonial photographs of Indigenous Australians

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be aware that this paper contains images and names of people who are now deceased.

The historical image has never held a more significant place in our online engagement with the cultural record. In the digital environment the research and publication value of images competes much more closely with the heavy materiality of the object and the traditional pre-eminence of the historical narrative. Colonial photographs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders possess a unique power to both demonstrate European colonial myth-making and corroborate Indigenous experiences that are otherwise unrecorded.

Photography played a significant role in the documentation of colonial Australia. The manner in which it was able to transmit the visual record of its time was perhaps its greatest innovation. Our ability to transmit images has now dramatically increased. Our digital discovery and delivery services offer great opportunities to restore these photographs within local community and domestic spheres and reconcile them with oral family histories.

This paper examines why these photographs were taken, their transactional provenance, the purposes of their original metadata and their institutional contexts. It then provides an environmental scan of some of the seminal and innovative content management systems that have been developed by and for local Indigenous communities in Australia and the ground-breaking work that has been undertaken in user experience design and the handling of cultural protocols. Finally, it considers the concept of a national database of Indigenous collection material in light of the strong legacy of localised content.

Colonial photography of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

In 2007, the curator Professor Helen Ennis introduced her book *Photography and Australia*, with the following statement:

> [The significant local differences of photography in Australia] stem from one inescapable historical reality: photography in Australia is not simply a product of the modern era, but is tied inextricably to the imperialist and colonialist underpinnings of modernity. Of primary importance therefore is the interaction between Indigenous and settler Australians. This has given rise to some of the most potent images in Australian visual culture.[1]

During this period, many photographs were taken of largely unidentified Indigenous Australians. Portraits and tableaux were produced for a number of reasons: as documentation of a supposed 'dying race', as visual evidence for scientific research, as picturesque representations of the noble savage to feed the commercial taste for the exotic, and in service of the colonial project. Also, exchanging personal and purchased visual records and making them accessible was an entirely new endeavour in the Nineteenth Century. Settlers were able to share visual records of their experiences

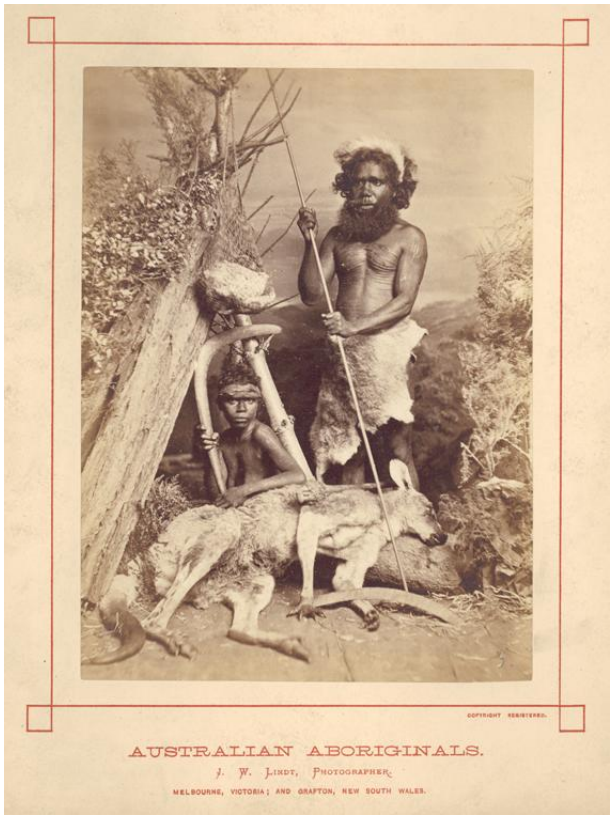
[1] Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, p. 8.

in Australia with friends and family back home and this created a boom industry for commercial photographic studios.[2]

Douglas T. Kilburn, *Group of Koori men* c. 1847, 7.5 x 6.5 cm (image), 9.2 x 7.9 x 1.7 cm (case closed); daguerreotype in leather, velvet and brass case, National Gallery of Victoria, PH407-1983

Some of the earliest surviving photographs taken of Indigenous Australians are daguerreotypes of Kulin people taken by Douglas Kilburn in about 1847, at the first photography studio in Melbourne. He took these photographs 'to portray the curious race of Aborigines by aid of the Daguerreotype'. In a similar vein, John William Lindt produced a series of photographs in 1873–74 of the Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung people who lived along the Clarence River in northern New South Wales. With painted sets and collected accoutrements, he produced elaborate tableaux. Both Kilburn and Lindt used high artistry in their attempts to portray and transmit their views of reality and their sitters were transformed from individual people into exotic curiosities. Kilburn's works were exhibited in Melbourne and Hobart and became well-known in England and Australia as illustrations for newspapers and books, while Lindt's series had a wide circulation across Europe in the World Exhibitions.[3]

[2] Annear, *The Photograph and Australia*, p. 9.
[3] Ibid., p. 48.



John William Lindt, St*udio portrait of an Aboriginal Australian man and woman with hunting weapons and a dead kangaroo*, c. 1873, 19.6 x 14.4 cm (image); 29.4 x 23.6 cm (sheet), sepia toned photograph, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-140830692

In addition to their circulation in social and personal spheres, photographs of Indigenous Australians also became key reference materials for anthropological and ethnographic scholars and collectors in Europe. The possibilities presented by the new technology for scientific documentation, particularly of such distant places, caused great excitement. [4]

> It is to science, however, that photography, the child of science, renders and will increasingly render, the most valuable aid...[5]

> … the photographer is bound by simple truth... he can neither adorn his picture, nor remove anything that is offensive... appearing as the exact transcript of nature.[6]

The photographs held a significant place in modern European anthropology, in which Darwinism was, by this time, orthodoxy. Charles Darwin's revolutionary *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and anthropologists sought to demonstrate his theory of the evolution of humankind by studying different Indigenous peoples around the world. In Charles Lyell's *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* from 1863*,* the Darwinian T. H. Huxley compared a recently discovered

[4] Edwards, Representation and Reality: Science and the Visual Image, in Morphy and Edwards (ed.) *Australia in Oxford*, p. 27.
[5] *Quarterly Review* 1864, quoted in *Journal of the Royal Photographic Society*, 15 November 1864.
[6] Bourne, On Some Requisites Necessary for the Production of the Good Photograph. *Photographic News*, *3,* p. 308.

Neanderthal skull with specimens of those of Aboriginal Australians.[7] The theory gained traction and it was believed that Australian Aboriginal people were the earliest living evolutionary stage of humankind, and that this could be demonstrated by physiological characteristics as well as by cultural practices and objects.

Devastatingly, it was a commonly held belief for late nineteenth-century Europeans that extinctions of indigenous peoples were inevitable as they 'came into contact with civilisation'.[8] After Darwin, this belief was converted into a scientific inevitability and a law of nature. This was not believed unfeelingly, as seen in the *Melbourne Age* on 13 January 1881:

> Such helplessness as they manifest stirs in us a feeling of pity, and we are moved by Christian philanthropy to give such help as will extend the vanishing point and allow them to glide off the stage rather than pass away abruptly.[9]

Because survival was believed impossible, the most important effort was to document. The drive to capture the 'dying race' of the 'childhood of man', and the public sentiment this stirred, was a strong impetus for the new technology of photography to be brought so quickly to Australia upon its invention.

Collecting institutions and colonialism

Museums in Europe are particularly significant to the colonial context as they were often the platform upon which the colonial project was displayed and promoted. The supposed scientific certainty of the extinction of 'pre-civilised' peoples confirmed for Europeans the growing stability of the colonies in Australia and validated European settlement.

During the later decades of the Nineteenth Century and the beginning of the Twentieth, a new kind of museum emerged in European capitals and universities. Many of these were the result of the dramatic cultural capital generated by world exhibitions. Burgeoning institutions included the Dutch Museum Volkenkunde in 1837 and the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV) in 1851, Berlin's commanding Museum für Völkerkunde in 1873, Paris's Musée d'ethnographie in 1878, and both the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) in Oxford and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge in 1884. This was also the period that collections of art and artefacts from Africa, Oceania and native America were dramatically expanded.[10] In Paris, the Musée de l'homme was founded in 1937 and the Musée des Colonies opened in 1931 after the Colonial Exhibition, later becoming Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie.

General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, founder of the PRM, was a strong advocate for the theory of Indigenous Australians as, in his own words, 'living representatives of our common ancestors'. His museum displayed internationally disparate pieces of material culture according to 'typology' in order to demonstrate the progress of humankind from primitive to civilised. He classified Australian Aboriginal tools and weapons as the 'lowest in the scale, because they

[7] Lyell, *The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man.*
[8] Mulvaney, The Darwinian Perspective, in Donaldson and Donaldson (ed.), *Seeing the First Australians,* p. 72.
[9] Maynard, 'Projections of Melancholy', in Donaldson and Donaldson (ed.), *Seeing the First Australians,* p. 92.
[10] Thomas, We need ethnographic museums today – whatever you think of their history. *Apollo Magazine*, 29 March 2016.

assimilate most closely to the natural forms.'[11] His now anachronous approach to cultural materials carried directly through to the foundational Australian museums. The Melbourne biologist, Walter Baldwin Spencer, who had studied under E. B. Tyler (another disciple of Darwin) and worked with him to move Pitt Rivers' collection to Oxford, became an honorary director of the National Museum of Victoria in 1900 and arranged the ethnographic collections in the manner of Pitt Rivers. Visitor information at the museum in 1901 explained that Aboriginal peoples 'may be regarded as a relic of the early childhood of mankind left stranded… in a low condition of savagery.' [12]

Photographic collections onsite and online

These vast collections of objects in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century museums were supplemented by similarly extensive photographic and documentary archives.[13] These photographic collections have long served as internal reference for museums and until relatively recently their exhibition value was considered minimal compared with the centrality of the object. They operated in a murky space between science, art and documentation and this is why they can still be found in museum, art gallery and library collections.

In the 1970s, anthropological and ethnographic museums began to be criticised for storing significant materials ransacked by colonial forebears, and divorcing them from their owners and lived cultures. This sparked the debate between the respective merits of displays endeavouring to present context and those prioritising aesthetics that continues today. Since the 1980s and 90s, there has been a reconceptualisation of museums and libraries worldwide. Ethnographic collections have been recontextualised and in some cases, integrated with other collections.[14] For example, the photographic collection of the Musée de l'homme (the Museum of Man) with 250, 000 objects and 25, 000 objects from the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie were removed to establish the formative collection of the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB) in 2006. Housed in a dramatic contemporary building, prioritising aesthetics and presenting the cultural objects of all indigenous peoples on one level, the MQB endeavours to embody a dialogue between cultures.

Despite the removal of such a substantial part of its collection, the Musée de l'homme reopened its doors at the end of 2015. The Musée de l'homme sought to collect and tell the story of humankind across the world and was also originally based around a linear narrative of primitive to civilised. Over time, it built a large photographic collection including many of Indigenous Australians. It also had a commercial bent, selling reproductions as souvenirs. Professor Evelyne Heyer, a specialist in genetic anthropology and a member of the museum's scientific committee noted that there is now no conflict or overlap between the MQB and the Musée de l'homme because 'their approach is purely artistic; ours is scientific.' The collection of Australian studio photography is now in the MQB, demonstrating the not entirely comfortable tension between the scientific, artistic and commercial consumption of photography.

Dr Christine Barthe, the Head of Photographic Collections at the MQB, believes:

[11] Mulvaney, The Darwinian Perspective, in Donaldson and Donaldson (ed.), *Seeing the First Australians,* p. 72
[11] Maynard, 'Projections of Melancholy', *Seeing the First Australians*, pp. 72–73.
[12] Ibid., p. 70
[13] Thomas, We need ethnographic museums today – whatever you think of their history. *Apollo Magazine*, 29 March 2016.
[14] Ibid.

> The photographs are scientific, they are documents, they are art and they are not any of these things. The [photographic] collection is associated with the [MQB's] library, but it also isn't. It is a collection at the Quai Branly, but it is also separate. In this way, it is interesting to note it is still ambiguous. But the identity of the whole museum is [intentionally] ambiguous, so this is maybe ok.[15]

Over the last 20–30 years, many museums and libraries have worked to refashion themselves as places for historical, contemporary and directly experienced cross-cultural encounter. They have also worked to open their collections up to wider publics outside their walls, primarily with mass-digitisation programs. If the carte-de-visite began the global and mass transmission of the photograph, then the web, applications and other platforms have broadened this to the point of ubiquity. In the digital environment these photographs are broken out of the library or museum and taken into the homes and hands of their audiences, including Indigenous communities whose ancestors are depicted. Many collecting institutions are also committed to using web-based systems to facilitate blogs, podcasts, visitor engagement, onsite multimedia, participatory models for education and exhibition, social networking and other collaborative activity.[16]

Descriptive metadata

Photographs were prized for capturing reality, whilst simultaneously peddling myths of 'the other'. Produced by non-indigenous anthropologists or commercial photographers and often obtained without consent; sensitive, personal and culturally critical information was often unwittingly disclosed to these early lenses. Much of the descriptive metadata that remains with our collections today came from the original creators or collectors of this material and is often vague, inaccurate, prejudiced or non-existent.

The significance of metadata was certainly not underappreciated in the colonial era. In many ways, photography was so celebrated because as an 'exact representation of reality', it was seen as capable of filling in all of the preceding gaps in scientific data collecting:

> Hirtherto [the advent of photography] the man of science, in many departments, has been at the mercy of the unscientific traveller. The ethnologist, the historian, the antiquarian, and often the geologist have to form theories upon data which have been gathered by a gleaner whose appreciation of the value of minute accuracy may be inaccurate.[17]

What was not understood was that photography is just as interwoven with a society's perceptions of the world around it as is any other kind of documentation. Despite the fabrication of studio portraiture of Aboriginal subjects, like those of Kilburn or Lindt, they were collected by museums for the medium's perceived capacity to document reality. Even staged studio photographs intended for the souvenir market were collected by anthropology museums as scientific data. Further, the collection of this data was unmethodical and most often involved gathering images into albums on

[15] In conversation with the author, 2 October 2014.
[16] Srinivasan, Boast, Furner and Becvar, Digital Museums and Diverse Cultural Knowledges: Moving past the traditional catalog. *The Information Society*, *25*, p. 273.
[17] *Quarterly Review* 1864, quoted in *Journal of the Royal Photographic Society*, 15 November 1864.

certain subjects.[18] Pitt Rivers himself created his Australian albums of studio portraits and cartes-de-visite which could have been purchased in any Australian photography studio.[19]

In 1874 the *Sydney Morning Herald* complemented Lindt for 'the artistic use he has made of the rugged subjects he has had at his disposal… They represent very faithfully aboriginals… as the traveller finds them in the wilds' – knowingly fabricated and thus hardly the 'exact transcript of nature'. However, this discrepancy between representation and reality was reconciled in the colonial mind, as the objective was to capture a single type, as though any or all Indigenous individuals could visually stand in for a single, whole race. Thus often as not, 'Aborigine' was enough to document a photograph, because it aimed to portray a type rather than an individual person, or even a member of a particular Indigenous Nation.[20] When individual names were captured, it was often just first names, European nicknames, or using generic naming conventions drawn from the 'noble savage' paradigm.

Portrait of an Aboriginal Australian man, Queensland c. 1870, 9 x 5.8 cm; albumen photograph, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-140699637 This photograph was also chosen for Pitt Rivers' own scrapbooking in Oxford.

Above is a portrait of an Aboriginal man, believed to have been from Queensland, held at the National Library of Australia (NLA), for which there is very little descriptive metadata. It is part of a scrapbook composed by C. H. Allen during a journey around the world between 1868 and 1872. It is

[18] Edwards, Representation and Reality: science and the visual image, in Morphy and Edwards (ed.), *Australia in Oxford*, p. 34.
[19] Ibid., p. 35.
[20] Ibid., p. 35.

most likely that Allen himself captioned the image 'A "Nigger"'. The NLA's catalogue record for this item used this inscription as the title for many decades, which was appropriate according to usual cataloguing rules, but it risked Library users assuming it was an endorsed title. The record has been updated to remove this inscription from the title, whist embedding it elsewhere in the record. It is important to not delete this information or tamper with the historical record, but exclusively relying on original metadata can, in this way, can have very problematic effects.

So despite the anthropological drive to document, these photographs reveal an active development of a historical gap in the creation of descriptive metadata. They also reflect a historical period which caused a devastating disruption to the dominant Indigenous methodology for the preservation of historical and cultural knowledge – oral transmission.[21]

Collecting institutions and cultural rights

There are many discrepancies between the priorities of libraries for open access to material, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions surrounding the power and cultural relevance of visual imagery. This is exacerbated dramatically as the pursuit of our institutions for increased digitisation, online discoverability and precedence of images makes them easily viewable to a mass audience. It is also potentially fraught when Indigenous material is selected for reproduction for exhibition, educational programs and commercial publication, where it is presented with a curatorial or authorial stance.

Australian libraries and museums have come a long way in recent decades in their approaches to managing cultural rights. Repatriation policies are held and actioned by collecting institutions at the federal and state and territory levels. Institutions are also well-versed in cultural protocols and maintain collaborative relationships with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island groups regarding access and reuse of Aboriginal cultural heritage, and some state and territory libraries have sophisticated Keeping Place models. *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* (ATSILIRN Protocols) were published in 1995 by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA). The Protocols were endorsed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network (ATSILIRN), and have been revised a number of times, most recently in 2013.[22] They have made an invaluable contribution to the understanding and prominence of cultural rights, the management of Indigenous collections and the development of greater cultural awareness across the sector.

However, as colonial visual historian Professor Jane Lydon has pointed out, there are issues associated with the creation of policies and guidelines for cultural protocols. They risk generalising interpretations of cultural heritage materials and standardising reasons for access and restriction. Our most commonly used actions in our cultural protocols demonstrate a respect for what is perceived as more 'authentic' cultural needs. These predominantly stem from ethnographic research among the societies of central Australia and risk coming to be used in a pan-Aboriginal approach. For

[21] Gibson, J., Lloyd, B. and Richmond C., Localization of Indigenous Content: libraries and knowledge centres and the Our Story database in the Northern Territory, in Steyn, van Belle and Mansilla E. V. (ed.), *ICTs for Global Development and Sustainability: Practice and Applications,* pp. 153–4

[22] AIATSIS and ALIA, *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*

example, restrictions of access to images of deceased people are particularly relevant to societies of central and north-west Australia. In applying these to other materials, communities who endured dispossession more severely may perceive them as yet further restrictions to Aboriginal heritage materials by white gatekeepers.[23]

One image, many meanings

John William Lindt, *Portrait of Mary-Ann Cowan, New South Wales* 1873, 19.8 x 14.4 cm; sepia-toned photograph, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-140830091

Ultimately, there are infinitely diverse Indigenous readings of these photographs. Despite the contexts in which they were taken and the manner in which they have been described by original sources, for many descendants today they are highly valuable family photographs. In *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies* edited by Lydon, Shauna Bostock-Smith tells the story of discovering Lindt's portrait of 'Mary-Ann of Ulmarra' whilst watching an episode of *Australian Story: The Light of Day*, who was identified by descendants and researchers as Mary Ann Cowan, Bostock-Smith's ancestor:

> I gasped aloud when I heard this. I have been researching my family history for the past few years, and I knew that Mary Ann Cowan was my great-great-grand-aunt. This exciting news had a profound effect on me. It is as though this lovely photograph has spiritually reached through time and altered my perception of her today. She has now

[23] Lydon, Return: The photographic archive and technologies of Indigenous memory, *Photographies 3*(2), pp. 175, 177.

> magically transformed from an abstract entity—a name on her marriage and death certificates—into a real life, flesh and blood, beautiful young woman.[24]

To some viewers, this photograph portrays a woman who was married according to European laws in Australia, who would have worn Western clothing and run her house, but has been stripped naked and posed in a studio as a representation of 'the other' for a European audience. However, when Bostock-Smith looks at this photograph, she sees 'a name on marriage and death certificates transformed into a flesh and blood, beautiful young woman'. These photographs can have many meanings, but their most valuable relevance is to their local contexts: for cultural significance, but also for filling gaps in genealogical lines, proving family connections to specific land and giving people family and culture back. In spite of their original objectives, they now paradoxically have the potential to fill gaps in a drastically disrupted and dispossessed history. By maintaining the exclusivity of their original metadata we severely constrain this potential.

The catalogue

The library catalogue rests on principles of standardisation and authority in order to facilitate sharing between institutions and improve public access. As we have worked to digitise more and more of our collections our primary goals in providing access have been consistency of language and categories. Standardisation and universality contribute to wider access, data sharing, interoperability and a greater consistency for users. However, we are still applying a single, authoritative hierarchy of knowledge to each item in collections.

Libraries and museums have been aware for many years that the original descriptions around collection materials and those that we produce do not fully account for the diversity of possible perspectives. Many institutions have increased engagement with Indigenous communities in publications, exhibitions, interpretive panels, events and presentations, educational programs and hosting visits in order to develop better descriptive metadata for collection materials. But rarely does this dialogue reach our catalogues, the control of which is kept in the hands of its experts on staff, who either fail to acknowledge the existence of diverse external expert communities or interpret their words on their behalf.

The concept of pluralism has been dominant in museum and library theory since the 1970s. Reality and truth are relative. Knowledge is gained through fluid social discourses and objects and documents must be engaged with actively through dynamic interpretation. Simply perceiving or accessing them is not enough for knowledge to be acquired. However, the control of library collections is still primarily held by expert staff and the core pursuit is classifying and systemising interpretation. Standardisation runs the risk of reproducing assumptions and prejudices held by historical and contemporary experts. It renders those perspectives perceived as outside the expert field invisible.[25]

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[24] Bostock-Smith, Connecting with the Cowans, in Lydon (ed.), *Calling the Shots*, p. 61. Annika Koorsgard was able to confirm the identity of Mary Ann Cowan in Breimba – looking for you: Lindt Research Project Final Report, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-17/mystery-of-the-lindt-photographs-mystery-solved/6402254

[25] Srinivasan, Boast, Furner and Becvar, Digital Museums and Diverse Cultural Knowledges: Moving past the traditional catalog, *The Information Society*, *25*, p. 269.

Databases

Australia has a strong legacy in the development of both national and local databases which strive to provide access to Indigenous documentary resources. To Ramesh Srinivasan et al, a growing divide is developing 'between grass-roots information and communication technology (ICT) efforts based on principles of participation and cultural mobilisation and the top-down bureaucratic approaches toward digitising cultural heritage materials'.[26]

Two of the best examples of such local ICT efforts are the seminal and well-loved database Ara Irititja, and the newer and impressive Mukurtu. Ara Irititja, 'Stories from a long time ago', was originally developed using a Filemaker Pro application by the Social History Unit of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunyjatjara Council with John Dallwitz in north-west South Australia in the mid-1990s. In this database, community members can add information to the catalogue records of photographs, audio and video material by tagging, blogging and commenting directly in the records. The categories of access it uses were defined by the elders, including gender, age, family relations and knowledge of country. The Northern Territory Library purchased a licence to Ara Irititja in 2004 for its use throughout its Territory-wide Libraries and Knowledge Centres (LKC) network, adopting the new name Our Story. It has demonstrated sophisticated user experience design from the beginning, and is successfully used across multi-lingual contexts, differentiated access controls, diverse levels of digital literacy and remote and outdoor locations.

Mukurtu, meaning 'dilly bag'—a safe keeping place for sacred materials—was developed by the Warumungu community in Tennant Creek, in collaboration with Kim Christen Withey and Craig Dietrich, using Drupal in 2007. Mukurtu has been developed into an open-source platform, as has Ara Irititja—known as the Keeping Culture Knowledge Management System (KMS)—and both are now flexible enough to meet the needs of diverse Indigenous communities with customisable access controls and functionality. The State Library of Western Australia has developed Storylines using Keeping Culture under Damien Webb.[27]

The Indigenous Photography Portal has been recently developed as part of an Australian Research Council funded project run by Jane Lydon. It aggregates the collections of the PRM, the MQB, the Museum für Völkerkunde and Cambridge's MAA. It is premised on collaborative efforts with relevant Indigenous communities, and welcomes requests for restrictions to access from Indigenous users.[28] This work goes a long way to increasing Indigenous description, ownership and control of protocols in these photographs; and provides a more open pathway to the European collections for Australian audiences.

Having relied on project funding, however, the Indigenous Photography Portal risks losing the capacity to update content, and not being preserved for the future.[29] One of the key factors of the success of Our Story is the ongoing resourcing, iterative redevelopment and management for the system. Moreover, it is embedded in the Northern Territory Library's LKC model. This includes digital

[26] Ibid., p. 273.
[27] https://www.keepingculture.com/ http://mukurtu.org/
[28] https://ipp.arts.uwa.edu.au
[29] Morton has experienced this with databases developed with project funding at the PRM in the past. In conversation with the author, 24 September 2014.

literacy training for users of the databases, the local employment of Community Library Officers, many of whom are Indigenous members of local communities, support for the creation and addition of new collection material, as well as providing physical spaces for serendipitous encounters with the database amidst other community services, particularly education.

Local vs national

Given the strong legacy of local databases, the multiplicities of control and access for a multi-cultural Aboriginal Australia and the growth of adaptable cultural management systems, is there a need for a national approach or point of access to Indigenous content stored in institutional collections?

In March last year, the New South Wales Aboriginal Housing Office stopped accepting statutory declarations as proof of Indigenous heritage. In response, Warren Mundine, the chairman of the Prime Minister's Advisory Council, called for the development of a national database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It would enable Indigenous Australians to prove their identity, which is required to access certain services and make it easier for Indigenous people to find out which First Nation or Nations they belong to. He made it clear that the process and the body established to oversee it must be independent, transparent and run by Indigenous people.

> Just from the historical approach because our people have been so knocked around and by governments of all political persuasions, of all political levels, that we have a distaste for trusting those types of organisations.

We are both closer and further away from a national database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than Mundine imagined. Anyone who has attempted family history research will know that a database which neatly documents everyone's ancestry is a fantasy. We have to work with available documentation and data and as we have seen, this is particularly scarce for Indigenous family history. However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index (ABI), 'a person and place index designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history research' maintained by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), goes some way to fit the bill. The ABI adheres to the ATSILIRN protocols, and uses controlled headings for place and language names from the AIATSIS thesaurus approved by the Library of Congress. It has more recently begun sharing its data with Trove, the national discovery service managed by the NLA, and is also exploring geospatial browsing and linked data. [30]

Trove's capacity to aggregate collections across Australia means that many institutional collections of these photographs are already discoverable via one search, along with the ABI and a wealth of other documentary records, maps, oral histories, newspapers and so on. Trove actively seeks to build Indigenous content in partnership with many collecting organisations. According to Marie-Louise Ayres, Assistant Director General, National Collections Access at the NLA:

[30] Wood and Cannon, People and place: new initiatives in database indexing for Indigenous collections in Australia. *The Indexer*, *33(* 3), pp. 101–10.

> …we are very aware that this [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] content can be difficult to find in Trove, sometimes relying on specialist Trove staff knowledge. We know that use of Trove by Indigenous Australians is lower than we'd expect based on population, and much lower than we'd like given the value of the content to communities across Australia.[31] We know that the current Trove interface is a major barrier for Indigenous people. We cannot resource any major changes to the interface in the foreseeable future. However, we have recently agreed to work with AIATSIS on how to engage with Indigenous communities to better understand how Trove would need to change to attract Indigenous audiences.[32]

Trove also allows tagging, commenting and the curation of lists which provides great potential for the addition of Indigenous community descriptions and local curation of subjects.

One of the biggest challenges for such a critical piece of Australian digital infrastructure would be the establishment and safeguarding of sustainable long-term funding models for iterative ICT development, digital preservation and strong community engagement. Such an undertaking would support a number of the current initiatives committed to by the Indigenous Affairs Group within the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, including culture and capability, education and land rights, though their primary funding model is grants which would be problematic. Given the necessity of collaborative efforts across Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural sectors, perhaps meetings of cultural ministers and elders would be advantageous.

Conclusion and next steps

In one glace, these photographs reveal a clear dichotomy of historical meanings: the colonial efforts of anthropology, promotion and commerciality of exoticism on the one hand and rare intimate depictions of people's ancestors on the other. In relying exclusively on the original metadata to facilitate discovery and delivery, our work at the national level still privileges the colonial endeavours.

The potential for compatibility between Mukurtu, which is in Drupal, and the Trove API is momentous. Can Trove function as both a central hub for online discovery of Australia's documentary heritage *and* export its relevant collections back into locally designed and built portals? Such decentralisation would involve relinquishing control and opening description up to multiple and diverse ontologies. Further, the protocols for cultural rights and access driving these datasets would, for the first time, be differentiated and community-determined.

Further research is needed into the knowledge management systems and the needs and user experiences of First Nations peoples around Australia. National and State Libraries Australasia is already assessing Mukurtu, but we need to also consider the potential of a two-way relationship between Mukurtu and Trove. We need to establish and safeguard ongoing funding models and collaborate across gallery, library, archive and museum sectors. The questions to ask as we move forward are: is user control and differentiation of user experience possible on this scale? Can it reinvent the national as local? And can we relinquish control of the fixed ontologies in our descriptive metadata that are our colonial legacy?

[31] This was a major finding of the 2013 Trove evaluation, nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia/files/2014/07/Trove-Customer-Evaluation-Report.pdf

[32] In conversation with the author 2 August 2016.

Glossary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index	ABI	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network	ATSILIRN	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services	ATSILIRN Protocols	
Application Programming Interface	API	
Ara Irititja		'Stories from a long time ago'. Based on a Filemaker Pro application. Developed into Our Story in the Northern Territory and into the Keeping Culture Knowledge Management System.
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies	AIATSIS	
Australian Libraries and Information Association	ALIA	
Content Management System	CMS	
Indigenous Affairs Group, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	PM&C	
Indigenous Photography Portal		Created as part of the *Globalization, Photography, and Race: the Circulation and Return of Aboriginal Photographs in Europe, 2011-2015* project led by Dr Jane Lydon. It aggregates the collections at Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Musée du Quai Branly and the Museum Volkenkunde.
Information and Communications Technology	ICT	
Knowledge Management System	KMS	
Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde	KITLV	The KITLV in Leiden now use the official English name of Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. The original name translates to Royal Institute of Language, Country and Ethnology.
Library and Knowledge Centres Network	LKC	
Mukurtu		'Dilly bag (a safe keeping place for sacred materials)'. Open source platform using Drupal.
Musée d'ethnographie		Ethnography Museum, Paris
Musée de l'homme		Museum of Man, Paris

Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie		Previously Musée des Colonies
Musée des Colonies		Later became Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie
Musée du Quai Branly	MQB	Paris
Museum für Völkerkunde		Ethnological Museum of Berlin
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology	MAA	Cambridge University
Museum Volkenkunde		National Museum of Ethnology, Netherlands. Leiden.
National and State Libraries Australasia	NSLA	
National Library of Australia	NLA	
Pitt Rivers Museum	PRM	Oxford University
Storylines		State Library of Western Australia's Indigenous database using the Keeping Culture Knowledge Management System
Trove		Australia's National Discovery Service. It aggregates library, museum, archive and gallery collections across Australia. It is run by the National Library of Australia.

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