Returning to Place: digital collections and community-based archives

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Introduction

The last decades have seen considerable effort invested in the digitisation of cultural heritage collections. Running in parallel to this has been a shift in museum practice towards engaging stakeholders in collaborative partnerships. As a result, digitised collections are more and more frequently moving outside of museums and archives and into new spaces of active community participation. These changes demonstrate the important connections collection items hold to multiple, dispersed communities and go some way to enabling collections to be re-placed into localised contexts, reversing the distancing from place inherent in the centralised repository. This paper looks at the transfer of digitised collections into the localised contexts of community driven archives to suggest that digitised collections are operating in powerful, new contexts, in which control of interpretation and access are returned to communities of origin.

The community-based archives discussed here include the Mobile Museum project undertaken by the Nalik community of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea (Were 2014), the Māori tribal group Te Aitanga a Hauiti’s innovative use of digital technology, in particular the Te Rauata digital storehouse (Ngata et al. 2012), and Aboriginal-owned, interactive digital archive Ara Irititja (Palmer 2013; Christen 2012). Each project demonstrates a community utilising digital technology to form new and dynamic relationships with items held in museum or archival collections.

Characterised by collaborative interpretation, community content generation, localised control, and restricted access, these projects propose a wider questioning of the relationship between centralised repositories and localised grass-roots knowledge production. How does access to digitised copies enable communities to renew relationships with their cultural heritage? How can the new and complex meanings attached, through active engagement, to localised copies inform the interpretation of the original object that is restricted from access? These questions get to the very nature of the new modes of community participation enabled by digitisation, and provide an important context in which to explore the resulting altered relationships between collections and communities.

Limits on the return

The opening up of access to digitised collections is one aspect of a range of repatriation initiatives with which museums and communities are engaging (Boast & Enote 2013; Geismar 2013; Christen 2012; Brown 2010). Repatriation, stemming from the Latin repatriare, meaning ‘to be returned to one’s country’, is generally understood in the museum context to consist of the return of culturally significant objects or ancestral remains from museum collections to their communities of origin. Digital or virtual repatriation involves providing electronic documents; collection metadata, audio or filmed material and high quality images or 3D scans of sacred
objects. More often than not, ownership, control and copyright of the authentic object remains within the existing power structure of the centralised repository (Hennessey et al. 2012). As a result many question whether these initiatives can be termed repatriation (Pickering & Gordon 2011, Boast & Enote 2013).

There are unquestionably limits on the return involved in the transfer of digital surrogates. Material objects have values that cannot be reproduced through the processes of digitisation (Boast & Enote 2013). Engagement with collection items remains important as projects such as Vicki Couzen’s Possum Skin Cloaks project demonstrates1 (Culture Victoria 2011). Although once an important functional and ceremonial item for Indigenous communities across southeastern Australia, possum skin cloaks are now rare. Two surviving 19th century cloaks are held in the Museum Victoria collection; the Lake Condah cloak of the Gunditjimirra and the Maiden’s Punt cloak of the Yorta Yorta people. Couzen’s experience of viewing the Lake Condah cloak makes clear the power of the material object:

Laid bare before us, no glass display cabinet, no barriers. I was overwhelmed with emotion – awe, respect, love, connection, yearning- all of these emotions swirling around inside of me. Lake Condah is part of my Grandmother’s Country.

It seemed, in that moment, that the Old People were standing there beside and around us. I felt as if the illusionary veils of time, space and place had thinned, dissipated and I could reach through and feel them, touch and see the Old People. It was a profound spiritual experience (Couzens 2011).

This encounter inspired a process of reclaiming identity through regeneration, revitalisation and remembering. Couzens and others studied the cloaks and developed a contemporary practice of cloak making, including the creation of a number of possum skin cloaks worn by Indigenous leaders in the Opening Ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games, which ‘sparked a major cultural phenomenon, a renaissance of an almost lost cultural practice’. (Couzens 2011) As Couzens (2011) notes the cloaks as objects are closely tied with cultural practices, language, identity and pride. Access to the collection items facilitated continuing the practice of making and wearing possum skin cloaks which has strengthened cultural identity and spiritual healing in Aboriginal communities across Victoria (Culture Victoria 2011).

Although engagement with material cultural remains important, some objects appear more amenable to digital repatriation than others. Jane Lydon’s (2010) work on photographs suggests that historic photographs are useful and highly valued when digitally repatriated. While a digital return does not address the important issues surrounding the return of material culture, when deemed suitable by a source community, digital copies can provide forms of access and control not previously available.

It is not the material object that is returned in the projects discussed here. What is returned is information in the form of a digital surrogate or representation. The conventional museum collection can be seen as a disconnecting device, operating within discourses of protection that restrict access. In addition, the legacy of colonial collecting practices is such that collections are geographically remote from many of the communities they represent. The colonial system was one whereby objects and wealth moved from the periphery of the colonised lands, to the centres of power, in an expression of the dominance over that territory (Byrne 2003). Repatriation is a reversal in a number of ways, and has a spatial quality (Byrne 2003). As communities of interest gain access to digitised copies of collections, those digitised copies can be seen to move outside of the centralised repository and return to the place of the community; whether that ‘place’ is a cartographically defined location or a networked communal imaginary.

The ability of the digital copy to be in multiple locations at any one time and to move, relatively easily, between networks of shared interests has a number of implications. While digital objects can abstract and dilute place—by being placeless—they can also enable new forms of ‘em-place-ment’ when relocated to new contexts. The projects discussed here involve the surrogates of collection items being ‘re-placed’ into localised contexts and ongoing cultural practices.
There is no suggestion that, in any of the projects discussed, digital copies stand in for the material objects. As identified by Robin Boast & Jim Enote (2013), virtual repatriation projects are about information sharing rather than restitution. The projects discussed here involve collection items that the various communities have deemed suitable for digital repatriation. It should be noted that these projects occur in conjunction with ongoing negotiations that also involve the physical transfer of cultural material (Were 2014, Ngata 2012). What is proposed is that the return of digital copies of suitable collection items, into the localised contexts of community-driven digital projects, represents a new form of access and circulation. This allows us to speculate that the future of digitised collections is one of proliferation. As digitised collections become open to collating and archiving by communities of interests they acquire multiple meanings and connections related to their changed contexts. Increasingly circulating out of the structure of the collection repository, the connections between copy and original become harder to define. The projects discussed here demonstrate copies of collection items engaged in active cultural exchanges, while collection items themselves remain distanced from the contexts that give them meaning.

The following is an overview of a number of community-based digital archives and presents what can be seen as an area of evolving practice. It should be noted that the discussion here has not been informed by direct involvement with the projects. There is an expanding body of literature within anthropology, museum studies, and information studies, which explore the effectiveness and outcomes of providing access to digital copies of collection items. This article draws on this scholarship, as well as the writings of people involved in the projects discussed and the available project material. The projects are examined to identify the ways digitised collections are moving back to the places to which they are connected. They also illustrate the different values collection items gain when located in situated relationships with communities, and the challenge for centralised repositories in responding to and learning from dispersed and community-generated knowledge production.

**Nalik and the mobile museum interactive application**

The Mobile Museum project was undertaken by the Nalik community of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea and Queensland University in 2012 and has been written about by University of Queensland academic Graeme Were (2014). Software developer Ortelia has provided a demonstration of the project on YouTube and information related to it on their website (YouTube 2012, Ortelia 2015). The Mobile Museum is a custom-made interactive application for viewing scans of ceremonial malangan carvings in a dynamic 3D environment. The platform allows users to explore the artefacts in great detail and in the context of supporting information including text, audio, and video. The Nalik people of New Ireland are renowned for complex funerary ceremonies known as malangan. The term ‘malangan’ also denotes carved wooden sculptures displayed during these ritual events. An essential part of contemporary Nalik cultural practices, the elaborately carved sculptures are still in use, but much of the knowledge and skill associated with making malangan has been lost from daily practice. Where once there was a wide variety in the complexity of malangan designs, today only a few designs remain circulating in New Ireland. Were (2014: 136) notes that, with over a century of Methodist and Catholic missionary influence, ritual protocols and
proceedings related to malangan have been pared down. The tangible result of this is a loss of malangan-related knowledge and a loss of carving skills. Numerous malangan carvings reside in museums collections, including the Queensland Museum. The Mobile Museum project was undertaken to provide Nalik access to the diversity of malangan designs found in museum collections, now unavailable in New Ireland (Were 2014).

Were (2014) describes the evolution of a partnership between the Nalik people and Queensland Museum to provide access to detailed images of the malangan in their collection. Early discussions of physical repatriation highlighted a number of difficulties. Were (2014: 136) notes that due to the lack of provenance associated with the Queensland Museum malangan, the Nalik felt returning the carvings to their rightful owners would be difficult and problematic. Like many source communities, the progressive colonial influence and the process of removal of ceremonial objects has impacted structures of ownership and social contexts to the extent that return proposes numerous problems (Were 2014). Tribal leader Martin Kombeng was interviewed by SBS's Stefan Armbruster (2012) discussing the Nalik's view on digital access, which, as he notes, by no means represents the whole of New Ireland. Kombeng and others identified that the inherent power of the malangan, which prohibits touching and close contact, precluded other available forms of safe-keeping. (Were 2014: 137). These objects are, as Were notes, ‘dangerous heritage’, whose taboos of contact are negated in a digitised copy (2014: 137). Access to the digital surrogates in this case, provided the community with a version of the malangan carving, suitable for use as a teaching aid and through which they could continue cultural practices.

Close consultation with Nalik representatives was a key part of the project’s development. Following inspection of the museum’s collection, suitable malangan were identified and detailed 3D scans produced by Ortelia, a Brisbane-based digital design company specialising in 3D imaging (Were 2014: 138). The process involved the Nalik identifying important features of the carvings and Ortelia producing detailed scans of those elements. The digital platform for interacting with the scans was also carefully considered. The community identified how they wanted to use the resources and the platform was built in response to this. The capacity to zoom in on details was important, as was the ability to place two malangan side by side in comparison. Queensland Museum collection information was included to provide context for each malangan, and an annotation tool enabled the Nalik to add their own information including audio and text files. A number of technical limitations were also taken into consideration. The size of files was kept small for less powerful computer operating systems and a CD-ROM format was adopted
to allow access in the dispersed places of the community, which are outside the limited infrastructure of internet connectivity (Ortelia 2015). Tribal administrators are able to add their own knowledge into the Mobile Museum system, edit the existing information, and add new content to further contextualise the carvings, including creating links between items and tags.

Whilst, the Nalik can access the Queensland Museum’s online collection record for the malangan, the collection record differs from the Mobile Museum platform in a number of ways (Queensland Museum 2016). The information provided is limited and museum-specific, the context in which it is presented has little to do with its cultural meaning. Catalogued under just a few broad categories, such as, ‘New Ireland, malangan’. With just one overview image and one detail, the record allows for limited visual interaction. Perhaps most importantly, there is no capacity for collaborative interpretation, in the form of comment, tagging, or annotation. Opportunities to incorporate the information provided in the digitised collection record within ongoing cultural practices are very limited.

The limited information provided on museum websites such as the Queensland Museum’s is, in many cases, in response to cultural sensitivities or requests from the source communities. These are powerful ceremonial objects and interpretation of their meanings (even their display) to an unfiltered public may not be appropriate. Similar cases have caused distress to other communities (Enote 2016). This too is unlike the Mobile Museum platform, where the community can manage sanctions associated with sacredness.

The Mobile Museum project is reportedly ongoing and evolving into one with a wider focus (Ortelia 2014). In October 2014, Ortelia supplied additional software and training so that the Nalik can scan and upload their own items to the archive. This indicates that the Mobile Museum is expanding to operate as a wider cultural management tool, incorporating objects in addition to those held by the Queensland Museum and with evolving interpretive information.

At its simplest, the project provides the Nalik people access to information about cultural objects that were otherwise unavailable. This access provides knowledge as well as the ability to make connections with the objects in their teaching and cultural practices. At a more complex level, the project demonstrates the way in which partnerships between collections and communities support new forms of knowledge generation. Operating in the place of the community the digital surrogates have a tangible presence in ongoing cultural development, whilst the original objects remain disconnected from the contexts that give them meaning. The digitised collection items involved in the project are operating in new contexts and within complex relationships outside of the collection-holding organisation. Although these forms of engagement demonstrate a ‘novel form of revitalisation, reintegration and possession’ (Were 2014:141), they also present challenges for the way organisations like the Queensland Museum respond to the community use of its collections. As it stands, the digitised record on the Queensland Museum website makes no reference to a continued community use in New Ireland. The collection item remains separated from its origin while the digital copy is relocated (re-placed) into a localised context and the dynamic relationships of ongoing cultural practice.

Te aitanga-a-hauiti and the te rauata collection management system

The Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti are a small tribal group originating from Ūawa (Tolaga Bay) on the east coast of New Zealand’s North Island. A number of Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti representatives, including
chairperson Wayne Ngata have been actively engaged with locating and reconnecting with the group’s dispersed taonga (ancestral treasures) (Ngata et al. 2012; Ngata 2012; Salmond 2012).

The Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti have a strong track record of adopting imaginative ways to engage with their now global population and to connect the community to their tribal home. Over the last decade the iwi (tribe) have led a series of projects to locate their traditional taonga, now held in collections in New Zealand and internationally, and to create digital surrogates as a means of maintaining a connection with their culture (Ngata et al. 2012). The Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti’s digital projects have been written about by Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, including Wayne Ngata (2012, Ngata et al. 2012), Auckland University academic (at one time based in Cambridge’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology), Amiira Salmond (2012; 2014) and museum professionals Carl Hogsden and Emma Poulter (2012).

The Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti began their initial digital repatriation project, ‘Te Ataakura’, (‘the red clouds of dawn’) in 2003. Ngata (2012) characterises the project as evolving out of efforts to ‘reclaim, revisit and reenergise’ the legacy of their ancestors ‘for the benefit of the people at home’ (Ngata 2012). Responding to the barriers to reclamation of objects, and then maintaining those objects, the Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti turned their focus to acquiring digital surrogates of tribal taonga (Ngata 2012). The Te Ataakura project began by locating and identifying tribal artefacts held in various collections around New Zealand. Originally a database, in 2005 this enterprise evolved into the Te Whatakorero interactive CD-ROM, gathering digital copies of tribal taonga into one location for use by the Hauiti community (Ngata et al. 2012: 236). Following that, the iwi’s search for their taonga turned to international collections. The community began dialogues with museums in the United Kingdom and Europe. These Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti driven initiatives established several partnerships, one of which was with Cambridge’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA). In 2010, the MAA began the ‘Artefacts of Encounter’ project, a research programme to identify Polynesian objects collected during voyages of exploration from 1765 to 1840 currently held in museums across Europe and the USA (Cambridge MAA 2015). The Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti became a source community project partner, assisting the collection holders to identify the provenance and significance of Pacific collection items (Ngata et al. 2012).

‘Artefacts of Encounter’ included the development of KIWA, an online research space to digitally reunite the dispersed Polynesian collections. KIWA was conceived as a collaborative space to provide researchers from a range of backgrounds access to digital representations of artefacts and associated documentation. These included labels, catalogue cards and inventories, as well as other archival sources related to the voyages (Hogsden & Poulter 2012). KIWA plays an important role in assembling otherwise scattered resources into one location and as a digital research environment in which information is shared between all project partners.

Although KIWA is an important access point for Hauiti, full use of their cultural material required the development of their own interface. The Hauiti used the KIWA resources to establish a separate but linked digital repository called ‘Te Rauata’ (‘the gathering together of images’), or what Ngata terms a digital taonga storehouse. Select materials from KIWA are transferred via gateway software into a system tailor-made by and for Hauiti. Hogsden & Poulter (2012) note that in the early stages of the Artefacts of Encounter project, Hauiti identified that their archive
had to function in a particular way to be meaningful to their culture and to those using it. Whakapapa, or traditional Māori principles of genealogical lineage, was the basis upon which the archive was structured (Hogsden & Poulter 2012). Whakapapa extends to both inanimate and animate entities and places everything in a descending order that relates to traditional conceptions of its origin (Māori Dictionary 2016). Hence, while both KIWA and Te Rauata are structured in a relational way, the nature of those structures, and the classification of items within them, are based on different ontologies.

Although virtual collections, the administrative locations from which the KIWA and Te Rauata archives are controlled and operate provides another important distinction. The Te Rauata operates from servers located in Uawa and owned and maintained by Hauiti, while the KIWA server is located in Cambridge at the MAA (Hogsden & Poulter 2012). The localised context of the Te Rauata is a critical part of Hauiti’s concepts of ownership and control of the material within it. As Ngata et al. note;

A degree of proximity to the land of Hauiti, to the marae of Hauiti, and to the people of Hauiti is paramount in assuring them that there exists a certain tangible control over their taonga….This allows Hauiti to maintain mana (authority) over their knowledge, and to manaaki (look after) that knowledge and share it with others on Hauiti terms (Ngata et al. 2012: 241).

While the project does not involve a physical transfer of objects it is still based on a conceptual return of control back to the place of the community.

Just as the MAA and other partner institutions place restrictions on the sharing of digital objects from their collections in the KIWA system, the Hauiti reserve the right to restrict and control the sharing of their information, and to withhold that which is deemed inappropriate or culturally sensitive from release. KIWA is an important source for Te Rauata, and Hauiti interpretation informs the content of KIWA, but the systems are not open to each other. To this end, Te Rauata and KIWA are localised hubs that form what Hogsden and Poulter term a ‘contact network’ (2012).

The evolution of the Hauiti archives from database to collection management system provides an example of a community independently gathering and managing a catalogue of their significant cultural artefacts. Within the locally controlled Te Rauata archive, community members add text, oral histories, mōteatea (chants), images, sound, and video files to the collection material. As a result of the archive’s collaborative interpretation facilities, Te Rauata holds content unique to that archive. Although the same collection items may be located on the KIWA system, or elsewhere, once in Te Rauata, the items take on the meanings and associations that the Hauiti give them and that are relevant to their context within ongoing Hauiti cultural practices.

The Te Rauata digital storehouse is one tool within a greater programme of tribal development reuniting Hauiti people with their taonga. By providing information about taonga and supporting ongoing conversations about its meaning within Hauiti culture, Te Rauata fulfils an important social and community function. ‘This project is about revalidation and reclaiming our taonga. We have had to consider issues of ethics, intellectual property, and copyright, and find some middle ground for negotiations with museums,’ says Ngata (2012). ‘In addition, the technical issues are complex, so we are building our own capacity to deal with these ourselves.’ (Ngata 2012). Through the creation and development of their own community-based archive, the Hauiti are negotiating new relationships with their taonga on their own terms and under their own control.

The Ara Irititja knowledge management system

As Hogsden & Poulter (2012) note in relation to the Te Rauata project, ownership and control goes far beyond content creation and management. The community of interest must inform the development of the platform from the early stages of the project so that it reflects their aims and localised protocols. The Aboriginal-owned interactive digital archive, ‘Ara Irititja’ demonstrates this in action.8
Ara Irititja (‘stories from a long time ago’) began in 1994 as a partnership between the Anangu community of Central Australia and the South Australian Museum. The Anangu’s stated goal was to ‘preserve and give us access to our cultural history’ (Anangu 2015). The development of an extensive digital archive quickly became the focus (Christen 2006). The project’s initial stages involved gathering and digitising Anangu cultural material from museums, archives, and private collections throughout Australia. The project has developed working partnerships with more than eight public institutions, and today holds over one hundred thousand items including film, sound files, photographs, scanned documents, and object records (Anangu 2015).

The project adapted and responded to the unique needs of its Anangu users in a number of ways. One of these was through the innovative physical presence of the niri-niri (‘scarab beetle’) mobile workstations. Without an existing information technology infrastructure the mainly Anangu project team had to provide the hardware to access the archive. This was achieved through a set of mobile workstations consisting of a computer, data projector, printer, and power supply, housed in a protective shell designed to exclude the desert dust and sand. The niri-niri are highly transportable, easily loaded onto the back of a Toyota and moved between the schools, education centres, and libraries of the remote Anangu communities. Through a mix of fixed workstations and the mobile niri-niri, the archive can be accessed from over 60 locations (Palmer 2013).

In response to practical issues, the design of the archive is media driven with the interface and database storage structure separated into material types. Where possible, Anangu languages such as Ngaanyatjara, Pitjantjatjara or Yankunytjara are used in place of, or in addition to English. Driven by the goal of providing access to the community’s cultural history, the archive interface is a simple, user-friendly one designed for engagement by children, elderly, and the visually impaired. It is also designed for interaction and participation:

Cultural and historical information is both distributed and collected through the software system. People of all ages are able to work together at the Ara Irititja workstations. It is a family and community group activity that draws together people of several generations. (Anangu 2015)

A key feature of the archive’s function is its carefully designed and managed levels of access. Ara Irititja operates entirely on the terms established by the Anangu and restricts access to some knowledge on the basis of seniority, gender and cultural sensitivity via a password system (Anangu 2015). Although the archive is not freely accessible on the Internet, the project has

Figure 6. Screen capture of the home page of the Ara Irititja Project. (http://www.irititja.com)

Figure 7. Screen capture of the niri-niri section of Ara Irititja Project website. The archive is made available to remote locations through these robust and practical mobile units. Each unit contains desk-top computer, printer, projector and battery back-up. The niri-niri are named after the desert scarab beetle. (http://www.irititja.com)
an external face in the www.irititja.com website. The project also has a public function in preserving and presenting Anangu culture in the way Anangu want it to be presented. The Anangu note on the Ara Irititja website:

In the past, Anangu were photographed and their knowledge recorded and published without any negotiation. Today, Anangu are careful to determine how their history and culture are presented to the world-wide audience.

(Anangu 2015)

With ongoing use and development of the archive, additions by Anangu of their own archival material have significantly increased so that the project is no longer primarily focused on access to digitised collection items. The active and ongoing engagement with Ara Irititja can be seen as particularly successful, with the archive playing a significant role in the contemporary social culture of the community (Palmer 2013: 121-122). The system recently migrated to a secure intranet browser-based platform, available on and offline as internet coverage dictates. The standards-based platform makes it possible for Ara Irititja to be used more easily on networked computers, including those in schools, TAFE institutions, and tertiary education systems (Anangu 2015). This evolution in platform also represents ‘a shift from the original archival function of the database, into a multi-faceted Anangu Knowledge Management System’ (Palmer 2013: 121). Christen (2006: 57) suggests that ‘the database has become an icon of indigenous-inspired technological solutions to practical problems.’

**Characteristics of community-based digital archives**

Community archival practices take in a wide range of approaches, however the community-based digital archives discussed here share a common set of characteristics. A key feature of these projects is that they gather dispersed material, often from multiple collections and private sources, into a single application. This demonstrates that, when enabled by mainstream institutions, digitised collections allow special interest groups to draw out records of a particular subject into separate and independent archives that enable new relationships with, and between collections.

Community-based archives also relocate collection items into localised contexts, so that engagement with the archive occurs in the local context. This re-contextualisation makes tangible the meaningful ties to elsewhere inherent in collections and demonstrates that collection items have different values when located in situated relationships with communities of interest. In addition, the projects discussed here are not just about access; the return involved is not a passive return. The collection item is returned into a dynamic context of ongoing cultural practice. The establishment of these facilities would have little impact if they were not engaged with across the community. Community-based archives require active participation that is social and collaborative. They invite people to take an active role in the interpretation and construction of heritage and they support the collective storytelling that connects people to both their communities and places (Giaccardi & Palen, 2008: 283). The projects all include annotation tools and the facility for the community to generate their own content and interpretation and add their own items to the archive. In this way, the items in the community-based archives discussed here are open to reinterpretation and re-signification in ways that conventional collections are not (Palmer 2013: 122).

These projects are also carefully tailored to the cultural requirements of the communities who use them, and reflect the ontologies of those communities. Once digitised collection items are acquired into a community-based archive they are immediately differentiated from the source record. They acquire a new context, new metadata, new interpretation, and new meanings. The way in which these new contexts inform an understanding of the record within the source collection requires further investigation. Current archival practice does little to respond to these external dialogues (Stevens et al. 2010).

Like many community archives, the projects discussed here are based around local ownership and restricted access. Community located digital archives enable local control, in which
decisions about access to material are made by the community through their own channels (Christen 2005). Going against the trend of open data implicit in digital networks and notions of community commons, these initiatives are not open. A concept like ‘citizen science’ assumes reciprocity between collections shared with communities without questioning the ability of mainstream archives or collections to adequately incorporate and respectfully manage the knowledge communities may attach to collection items. Communities with a history of exclusion and misrepresentation are likely to be suspicious of integration into aggregating platforms (Wakimoto et al. 2013). The local hosting of data servers, or independent cloud based storage, outside of a collection-holding institution is both a practical concern and a symbolic gesture of empowerment. This control can be seen as political sovereignty put into cultural practice (Christen 2011: 10).

The proliferation of community-run and localised repositories represents a number of practical challenges to archival practice. As the projects discussed demonstrate, vast quantities of information can be gathered in these archives. The challenges for digital preservation of mainstream cultural heritage is a massive and neglected challenge (Brand 1999). For marginal communities this is even more so. Long term storage, access, and security of the archive should be a central concern of community organisations. Hosting of large quantities of information is expensive and, if community structures change, financial support for the archive may not be ongoing. Additionally, to remain relevant and engaging for the community, the archive must continue to evolve. Development of these kinds of individual platforms is also expensive and subject to obsolescence. The future use and preservation of these archives may require partnerships with mainstream collections to ensure the archive’s long term survival.

**Future partnerships?**

Mary Stevens et al. (2010) and Diana Wakimoto et al. (2013) note a number of community archives that have evolved from independent operations to being administered by, or run in partnerships with, larger mainstream heritage institutions. It is noted that, traditionally, if a community wished to amalgamate with a larger institution, this meant surrendering control over the arrangement, description, ownership, and future use of their records. However, in accepting that not all records need to be located in a centralised repository, archival practice is adopting increasingly flexible custody arrangements, including allowing donor communities to retain ownership and control over the deposited archive. In other instances, museums provide data storage for local organisations, as well as training and support, but have no direct involvement in content (Stevens et al. 2010). As Stevens et al. (2010) note, there are clear benefits in collaboration for both mainstream and community-based archives. The adoption of inclusive flexible archival practices in these projects indicates a future of support and collaboration between community archives and institutions, although the open sharing of information cannot be assumed.

**Conclusion**

With no direct involvement in any of the projects discussed, this analysis is an outsider’s perspective on what appears to be creative responses to the restrictions associated with accessing cultural items held within collections. Even at the level of overview, the projects discussed here indicate new challenges for museum outreach and engagement practices. These projects indicate that digitised copies of collection items can make important contributions to the ongoing cultural practices of communities. They also indicate that, in order to facilitate these kinds of localised knowledge generation initiatives, collection managers need to support the dispersal of collections into community-controlled contexts. This requires archives to take flexible approaches to issues of ownership and control and to adopt inclusive archival practices, supporting and advising communities as they undertake their own independent archival projects.

This article speculates that the battles fought by Indigenous communities for the repatriation of their material cultural will pave the way for greater access to collections for all communities of interest. The specific qualities of digital objects—fluid, replicable, and able to be located
in numerous contexts simultaneously—mean that the future of digitised collections is one of proliferation. The projects discussed here indicate that the interactions and exchanges of ongoing cultural practice that give cultural items meaning will increasingly be located outside the managing authority of the collection-holding institution. Interacting with, responding to, and including these localised voices is a challenge for the future of archival practice.

Bibliography


Byrne, D. 2003, 'The Ethos of Return: Erasure and Reinstatement of Aboriginal Visibility in the Australian Historical Landscape', Historical Archaeology, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 73-86.


Endnotes

1 The Possum Skin Cloaks project is hosted on the Culture Victoria website and includes photographs, video interviews and an article by Vicki Couzens outlining the project’s development and impacts. http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/possum-skin-cloaks/


3 *Malanggan* is also spelled *malagan* and *malanggan*. Queensland Museum uses *malagan* in its collection catalogue.

4 A demonstration of the Mobile Museum application can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZwnzULKFOg


6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3utdn7s9 EhU

7 http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/project/te-ataakura-re-connecting-voyage-collections-archives-and-museums-through-creation-digital

8 The archive project’s original software demonstration can be viewed here: http://www.iriritija.com/the_archive/demo/demo.html

9 Agra Irititja used the now publically available Keeping Culture Knowledge Management System. See Keeping Culture for details: https://www.keepingculture.com