Editors’ preface

Place-based cultural knowledge – of ceremonies, songs, stories, language, kinship, and ecology – is the thread that binds Australian Indigenous societies together. Over the last 100 years or so, records of this knowledge in many different formats – audiocassettes, photographs, films, written texts, maps, and, increasingly, digital audiovisual recordings – have been accumulating at an ever-increasing rate. Yet many recognise and lament the fact that this extensive documentary heritage of Australian Indigenous peoples is dispersed. In many cases Indigenous people who participated in the creation of the records, or their descendants, have little idea of where to find such records or how to get access to them. In addition to collections held by lands councils, native title representative bodies, and other Indigenous organisations, collections are found in a variety of university and government institutions and archives, both within Australia and outside of it. Some materials are held precariously in ad hoc collections, and their caretakers may be perplexed as to the best ways to ensure that the records are looked after for perpetuity. The future relevance of these documentation efforts depends on several interrelated factors: how sustainable the collections are, how well documented and described they are, and how accessible they are to the communities who own them or have rights to them. This volume focuses on strategies and practices that enable the return and circulation of documentary records of cultural heritage back to their communities of origin. While archival return may be undertaken to provide measures of social equity and justice to Indigenous Australians, the issues raised in enabling return are complex. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

This volume presents a collection of chapters that address these issues from a variety of viewpoints. While languages and music constitute key themes in some chapters, we have taken a broad interdisciplinary view of the scope of this volume, which is co-published as a Special Publication of the open access journal *Language Documentation & Conservation* (University of Hawai‘i Press) and within the Indigenous Music of Australia series of Sydney University Press. The contributors include linguists, musicologists, anthropologists, artists, lawyers, archivists, Indigenous cultural practitioners, and activists. Each brings to the volume particular disciplinary perspectives that, when taken together, give nuanced and varied views of the issues at stake. Some are primarily concerned with intercultural relations that emerge in the processes of returns; some with changing attitudes to records of the past; some with designing and testing new technologies on the ground in communities; some with how to mobilise old records of language and song to enrich language revitalisation projects; and some with ways to transform old records into other forms, including books and pedagogical materials for use in school classrooms. It is significant that several of the chapters in the volume are written by Indigenous people who are multiply engaged as both contributors to, and end users of, archives. They have firsthand experience of the conundrums and complexities that arise in trying to access archives, but also a clear vision of the benefits to their communities in doing so.

The volume grew out of an Australian Research Council Linkage project designed to reinvigorate the latent social power of research collections of Central Australian cultural
knowledge by reintegrating them within the places and communities from which they originally emanated. As discussed in many of the contributions to this volume, such reintegration involves much more than simply obtaining copies of collections and lodging them in local repositories or returning materials to individuals on USB sticks. Navigating this complex terrain requires attention not only to the variable capacities of communities in terms of infrastructure and digital access, but also to the fact that attitudes to cultural knowledge and its transmission are constantly in flux.

Initially the focus of the volume was on Central Australia, and in particular the Central Land Council area, but the scope has broadened to include several contributions from beyond this region. The chapters are ordered roughly in an arc that begins in Arrernte country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs), where the main office of the Central Land Council is located, heads north through the Northern Territory as far as the Daly River region, back through parts of the Western Australian deserts and finally to Noongar country in the southwest corner of Western Australia (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Map showing some languages – and the ordering of chapters in this volume (numbered) (map: Jennifer Green)](image-url)
The chapters

Chapter 1, *Conundrums and consequences: Doing digital archival returns in Australia* (Barwick, Green, Vaarzon-Morel & Zissermann), takes a broad view of the social, political, and technical issues involved in negotiating returns. These questions are perforce framed by ethical and legal questions about access, competing ideas of ownership, and shifting community protocols surrounding rights of access to and the dissemination of cultural information. While accepting that the issues raised are seldom neutral and often complex, the chapter also argues for the power that culturally appropriate mobilisation of archival materials can have for inheritors of the knowledge they embody.

Chapter 2, *Deciphering Arrernte archives: The intermingling of textual and living knowledge* (Gibson, Angeles & Liddle), is an edited interview with two Arrernte men, Shaun Angeles and Joel Liddle, who discuss their deep and varied interests in records and the archives that contain them. Both are interested in harnessing the potential of archival material as a means of assisting in Arrernte language and cultural transmission. They explore some of the issues they encounter as they work through archives, the challenges of variant orthographies, the limitations of conventional cataloguing requirements, and the importance of reading archival texts in ways that see them emplaced and tested against the knowledge of elders. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the role of digital technologies in the future dissemination of cultural materials.

Orthography as a particular site of cultural contestation or as the pivot of a ‘predicament’ is also centre stage in Chapter 3, *Reflections on the preparation and delivery of Carl Strehlow’s heritage dictionary (1909) to the Western Aranda people* (Kenny). Kenny discusses the difficulties she encountered when bringing into the public domain the Aranda, German, Loritja [Luritja], and Dieri dictionary manuscript compiled by Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow in 1909, and the associated politics of knowledge and ownership involved in the process.

In Chapter 4, *Returning recordings of songs that persist: The Anmatyerr traditions of akiw and anmanty*, Gibson reflects upon the fieldwork experience of returning archival song recordings to Anmatyerr-speaking communities. Digitisation has made the return of recordings made by researchers in the past far more achievable than ever before. This technological advance, combined with the ethical and political imperative towards decolonising methodologies in Indigenous research, has resulted in considerable interest in ensuring that recordings of cultural value be returned to Indigenous communities. The account highlights the relational properties of song and its connections to people and place, and provides important insights into how these communities perceive the archiving and preservation of this material.

Three chapters deal with issues of archival access and return in Warlpiri country. Chapter 5, *Incorporating archival cultural heritage materials into contemporary Warlpiri women’s yawulyu spaces* (Curran), looks at women’s ceremonial practice of yawulyu, and the ways in which Warlpiri women engage with archival cultural heritage materials and incorporate them into present-day performance contexts. Case studies, including the production of songbooks, dance camps, and a community arts performance, illustrate that where there is engagement with legacy materials knowledgeable Indigenous people must take the lead, and they must be properly supported as part of the repatriation process.
Chapter 6, *Enlivening people and country: The Lander Warlpiri cultural mapping project* (Vaarzon-Morel & Kelly), presents a case study of a cultural mapping project directed by Lander Warlpiri people in Central Australia with the support of the Central Land Council. The project arose from concern over aspects of the changing lifeworld of younger people, and the increasingly circumscribed opportunities for them to acquire the embodied place-based knowledge and experiences that are regarded as foundational to local identity, social interrelationships, and cultural continuity. The project aimed to revitalise cultural knowledge through the intergenerational engagement of family groups in country visits and mapping activities, in concert with the performance of stories, song, and rituals. This process was augmented by ethnographic information derived from archival and other sources.

Chapter 7, the final Warlpiri contribution, *Re)turning research into pedagogical practice: A case study of translational language research in Warlpiri* (O'Shannessy, Disbray, Martin & Macdonald), describes a process whereby methods and materials collected for language documentation research have been returned to speakers in communities through the implementation of professional development activities for Warlpiri educators in bilingual education programs. The focus is on the documentation of children’s speech that took place in four Warlpiri communities in 2010. The materials were returned to the Warlpiri community and utilised in an active cycle of locally focused professional learning activities.

Chapter 8, *"The songline is alive in Mukurtu": Return, reuse, and respect* (Christen), examines the return, reuse, and repositioning of Indigenous archival materials, specifically within the Warumungu community in Central Australia. These practices of return have been spurred by decolonisation and reconciliation movements globally, and at the same time catalysed by new technologies. Cultural materials in new digital formats are not just returned, but through the process are reinvented, reused, and reimagined in kin-based and place-based networks. Examining the creation, use, and development of Mukurtu CMS, this article examines the implications for digital return as a decolonising strategy.

Chapter 9, *"For the children...": Aboriginal Australia, cultural access, and archival obligation* (Croft, Toussaint, Meakins & McConvell) details two interrelated stories. The first is a moving personal account by Brenda L Croft about constructive archival management and access and her discovery of images of her grandmother. The second, contrasting example is about the consequences of restrictions on access to the Berndt Field Note Archive. This chapter raises crucial ethical and epistemological questions: for whom are archives created and conserved, who is obliged to care for and authorise access to them, and to whom do they belong?

Chapter 10, *Working at the interface: The Daly Languages Project* (Nordlinger, Green & Hurst), discusses the goals and outcomes of the Daly Languages Project, which has developed website landing pages for all of the languages of the Daly region of northern Australia. The chapter discusses each step in the design of the website landing pages and advises readers on how they can access and adapt the open-source framework for their own purposes.

Five chapters deal with different aspects of archival processes in the Western Desert. The first, Chapter 11, *"We never had any photos of my family": Archival return, film, and a personal history* (Myers & Stefanoff), is a conversation about processes behind the scenes of the acclaimed film *Remembering Yayayi*, which emerged from a project to return raw film footage filmmaker Ian Dunlop shot at the early Pintupi outstation of Yayayi in 1974. In 2006,
Byers and Stefanoff took this material back to Kintore and Kiwirrkura. One of Myers’ long-term Pintupi friends, Marlene Spencer Nampitjinpa, provided a moving personal commentary on the footage, and this is included in the documentary. Stefanoff and Myers reflect on how the repatriation project catalysed memory and produced new Pintupi community historical knowledge, particularly about outstation life, early local forms of self-determination and the transformation of lives over a 40-year period.

In Chapter 12, *Return of a travelling song: Wanji-wanji in the Pintupi region of Central Australia*, Turpin discusses responses to the return of recordings of Pintupi song made in 1976, with particular focus on one song, *Wanji-wanji*, which featured on the recordings. Wanji-wanji was once a popular song performed for entertainment across the western half of Australia. For many who heard the recordings, it was an emotional experience. Those who knew the song recalled the place and time in which they had heard it long ago. The confidence of people’s responses varied depending on factors such as whether the individual knew the song, whether they had experience in using archival recordings, and whether they perceived there was community interest and support for classical Aboriginal singing practices.

Chapter 13, *Never giving up: Negotiating, culture-making, and the infinity of the archive* (Thorner, Rive, Dallwitz & Inyika), looks in detail at Aṉa Iritijja, an archive built to manage collections of photographs and other media in remote communities in the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, and Yankunytjatjara lands. The chapter focuses on specific examples of what happens when photographs enter the archive, and what emerges when photographs become available for a variety of uses that are integral to Aṉangu cultural reproduction and cultural futures. In particular it discusses a case study of how the archive manages instructions about what to do with representations of a person after their death.

Chapter 14, *Nura’s vision: Nura’s voice* (Bryce, Burke & Rive), details the processes of collaboration that brought to fruition the autobiography of Pitjantjatjara woman Nura Nungalka Ward (1942–2013). The autobiography gives an extensive ethnography of daily life for Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara families still living on their traditional lands amid the profound changes brought by the arrival of white settlers, doggers, missionaries, and the atomic bomb tests. This chapter details Nura’s processes, including her use of Aṉa Iritija to record her knowledge and then as a source for her book, which is the most significant publication to date to be sourced through the Aṉa Iritijja project.

Chapter 15, *i-Tjuma: The journey of a collection – from documentation to delivery* (Ellis, Green & Kral), follows the iterative cycle of documentation, archiving, and return of a verbal arts collection resulting from a documentation project in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands of the Western Desert. The chapter discusses cultural, ethical, and technical issues negotiated in the process, including the workflow from the archived collection in PARADISEC (Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures) to LibraryBox, a portable digital file distribution tool designed to enable local delivery of media via the LibraryBox wi-fi hotspot. The research team also held a series of community film festivals in Western Desert communities as part of their strategy of consultation and return. Their study demonstrates that delivery solutions for archival media need to be tailored to the technological capacities of particular communities. They also argue for the value of long-term engagement between research teams and the communities they work with.
The final chapter in the volume, Chapter 16, *Ever-widening circles: Consolidating and enhancing Wirlomin Noongar archival material in the community* (Bracknell & Scott), details how senior Noongar of the Wirlomin clan in the south coast region of Western Australia established an organisation to facilitate cultural and linguistic revitalisation by combining community-held knowledge with documentation and recordings repatriated from archives. This process inspired the collaborative production of six illustrated bilingual books. They faced challenges due to issues of orthography and legibility in written records; the poor quality of audio recordings; and the incomplete documentation of elicitation sessions. Because the archive is so fragmentary, community knowledge is vital in making sense of its contents. Returning archival documentation of endangered Indigenous languages to the community of origin can provide empowering opportunities for Indigenous people to control, consolidate, enhance, and share their cultural heritage while also allowing time and space for communities to recover from disempowerment and dislocation.

**Notes on terminology and spelling conventions**

In Australian usage, the term ‘Aboriginal’ is generally used to cover the Indigenous nations of mainland Australia and Tasmania (not including the Torres Strait Islands). The term ‘Indigenous’ may be used as an umbrella term for all of Australia’s first nations, covering both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural domains. In this volume authors may prefer either term, or use them interchangeably. We have attempted to be consistent in the use of capitalisation for terms such as Aboriginal, Indigenous, and Dreaming (and equivalent terms in Indigenous languages), despite varying opinions. Other words – such as ‘elder’, ‘country’, ‘law’, ‘traditional owner’, and ‘western’ – are generally rendered in lower case unless individual authors have explicitly chosen to do otherwise. Where possible we have followed the conventions outlined in published dictionaries of Indigenous languages for the spellings of language words. However, this is not always straightforward as conventions vary between individuals, over time, and across regions.

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