

Indigenous Uses of Photographic Digital Heritage in Postcolonizing Australia

Abstract

The process of “postcolonizing” continues in the former settler colony of Australia, entailing intense struggles over national identity and culture. Digital heritage plays a key role in these conflicts, in the form of historical and newer archives that have become increasingly important within Indigenous advocacy for recognition. Constructed from more traditional museum, library and private collections, these have become digital assets that now circulate in radically different ways – for example, as proof of identities, and links to Country. Since the late 1990s, as a result of postcolonizing advocacy by Indigenous people and cultural institutions in alliance with rapidly developing digital technologies, a profound shift in management practices has facilitated the assertion of control by First Nations people. These are exemplified by the *Ara Irititja* project, and its replicants, such as the *Storylines* project at the State Library of Western Australia. Digital heritage and digitized historical photographs in particular are now considered to be key resources for building Aboriginal history and identity, challenging oppressive state narratives and strengthening communities. Despite concerns regarding loss of culture caused by globalization and continuing inequalities, Aboriginal interests have drawn upon this expanded photographic digital heritage resource, to advance their rights through new temporal practices of production, circulation, and consumption.

Keywords: Indigenous Australian, Aboriginal Australian, postcolonizing, archives, colonial photography

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In the old days, Yolŋu went everywhere with their spears. Like my father, up until the '60s or '70s; he always had his spear with him. He used it for hunting, to get food for the family. He used it to protect himself and to show others that he was a man with law and ceremony and connections to the land and environment. These days, every Yolŋu has a phone. Men, women, kids too. I don't know what will happen in the future for the generations that will follow. ... One thing I do know is that Yolŋu can use their phones to do many *mak* [good] things for their family and their future. We know how to use mobile phone technologies in ways that reach further than any Telstra tower. Because sometimes you need to forget about the signal, forget about recharge and concentrate on who you are and where you belong. These days Yolŋu can use the phone to connect us to the *madayin* [sacred objects], the *wäŋa*, the old people, with our sacred patterns and our identity. (Paul Gurrumuruwuy, *Miyarrka Media*, quoted in Gurrumuruwuy et al 2019, 1.)

Yolŋu media maker Paul Gurrumuruwuy's comments point toward the ways that communities in Arnhem Land in northern Australia have embraced *yuta* [new] technology for many purposes – not least to keep culture alive in the present and for the future. Many have noted that for Australian Aboriginal people, memory is seen through the present, and is strongly future-oriented: as Melinda Hinkson (2014, 7) argues of the Warlpiri and other central Australian communities, “acts of remembering occur against current concerns and in respect of the future.” The past is not separate from the present, nor from the future, in a multi-temporal, future-focused orientation inherent across diverse Australian Aboriginal cultural traditions. This Indigenous world view has become increasingly recognizable within current theorizations of heritage as social action, acknowledging that significance is measured in the present, and with an eye to future benefit. Such orientations challenge the emphasis on the material within the Western heritage tradition, and Australia's powerful national framework for political community, history and identity. Photographs and the revolution in digital heritage have become important in creating and renewing the relations between people that constitute an Indigenous world view, frequently through temporal disruption. This increasingly important heritage resource counteracts the fragmentation and disconnection of families and Country caused by colonization.

Twenty-first century transformations in media include the rise of computer-based networks, social networking applications, and more recently “smart” mobile phones, bringing about a significant global acceleration in the nature of mediated experience. Some argue for its liberatory

potential - for example, Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain (2013, 2) suggest that the Internet, mobile phones, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter “made the difference” in the 2010-2011 Arab Spring. Using these technologies, “people interested in democracy could build extensive networks, create social capital, and organize political action with a speed and on a scale never seen before”. Others, however, point toward the *mis*-use of media, or its failure to accomplish change (e.g, Simons and. Despite the rapidity of digital permeation, several scholars remind us that photography has always been characterized by plural and multiple forms and uses (e.g, Lister 1995; Geismar 2013; McQuire 2013). Martyn Jolly (2013, 1) suggests that the digital is simply an evolution, which has only intensified the “trends and qualities already fundamentally inherent in the medium”. From around 2007, as new media began to radically transform many aspects of human life, including the constitution, practices, and meanings of heritage, what is now termed digital heritage has been the focus of scholarly analysis – regarding its role within museums, for example (e.g., Parry 2007; Dewdney, Debosa, and Walsh 2013). As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) explains, “Digital heritage is made up of computer-based materials of enduring value that should be kept for future generations,” and notes that “human knowledge or expression” are increasingly “created digitally, or converted into digital form from existing analogue resources”. However, these are frequently ephemeral, and require “purposeful production, maintenance and management to be retained” (UNESCO, 2003). Digital heritage takes many diverse forms – it does not simply comprise new archives produced by official agencies and projects, but may also include the ways that technologies such as mobile phones may enable past-present-future engagement, as well as the circulation of private archives and meanings outside public, official or permanent circuits. Traditional collections amassed by museums, libraries and private collectors, often linked to scientific disciplines such as anthropology, as well as commercial imperatives, have become digital assets that now circulate in radically different ways.

In this article I explore the ways that Indigenous Australians, or Aboriginal people, use digital heritage in the context of intense struggles over national identity and culture.¹ I focus specifically on photographic digital heritage and its role within a “postcolonizing” Australia (Moreton-Robinson 2015), where campaigns for Indigenous rights continue. I examine Australia’s history as a former settler colony, and the ways it has shaped the exclusion of Indigenous people from a national visual tradition. Visual culture has supported a strongly nationalistic Australian heritage regime, but since the 1990s, largely as a result of Indigenous activism and cultural institutions in alliance with rapidly developing digital technologies, a profound shift in management practices has facilitated the assertion of control by Indigenous people. Australian Aboriginal interests have drawn upon this expanded digital heritage resource, including digitized photographs, to reconstruct links to Country,

kin, and culture, and to maintain cultural well-being. These uses have been supported by a range of digital archival projects, as well as private practices. In the Indigenous campaign for recognition and inclusion, digital heritage is also a means to assert and advance status within mainstream society. As heritage practice has become increasingly self-reflexive and democratic, it increasingly aligns with Indigenous practices of remediation and future-making.

The struggle over Australia's past

As a former settler colony Australia's history is distinctive in its absence of a coherent concept of Australian citizenship, a "non-citizenship tradition" that is founded on the "deliberate eschewing of citizenship in favour of subjecthood" to Britain and the exclusion of "non-white groups": that is, both absence and exclusion (Galligan and Chesterman 1999, 73; Dutton 2002, 19). Race has been a key marker of inclusion and exclusion of legally recognized subjects entitled to a range of civil, political, and social rights. Originating during the 1960s, the Australian heritage system was driven by the impulse to produce a unique national story, and emphasized the material, in the form of sites and objects (Byrne 1996; Ireland 2002; Davison 2000). Just as settler colonial society sought to assimilate Aboriginal people into the white national body, so Australian heritage discourse sought to appropriate Indigenous tradition into a venerable genealogy in constructing what Denis Byrne (1996) has termed a "deep nation", by grafting the more recent settler history on to an ancient Indigenous past.

Colonial histories denied colonial conflict, and confined Aboriginal people to the period before White settlement, but from around 2000, Australian approaches have rapidly expanded their definitions of heritage, and recognized more diverse forms of attachment to the past. Heritage is now understood to constitute an active process of identity formation and a form of social action (Ireland, Brown, and Schofield, 2020; Byrne, Brayshaw, and Ireland 2003), and has been re-theorized as a cultural process of meaning and memory-making, while recent work examines heritage as a future-assembling project (e.g. Harrison et al. 2016; Meskell 2018). As a symbol of shared pasts and values, heritage is also a primary site of conflict between groups whose views of the past and present clash (Ireland and Lydon 2005). Since the 1990s, heated debates within Australian society have concerned issues such as how to acknowledge and narrate frontier violence, assimilation policies now known as the Stolen Generations, and self-determination. Australia's establishment of a free society with democratic institutions was integrally structured by the counter-story of Indigenous dispossession (Curthoys and Mitchell 2018, 411; Laidlaw 2015). Aboriginal people insist on their unique links to

Country, as the original occupants of the land. Indigenous intellectual Aileen Moreton-Robinson uses the term “postcolonizing” to describe the situation for Indigenous people whose homelands have not been decolonized, and where “the colonials did not go home” (2015, 10).

Aboriginal claims to land were increasingly acknowledged during the 1990s by the recognition of native title. Since that time, however, arguments about cultural assimilation have grounded the rise of right-wing populism, and today, it is clear that Australia is only slowly and unevenly moving away from policies of control over Indigenous people toward policies of Indigenous decision-making and self-determination, encapsulated by the concept of Aboriginal sovereignty. Indigenous people are unequally subject to continuing colonial practices such as the forced exploitation of Aboriginal land for extractive industries such as mining, as well as the continued intervention into Aboriginal lives through work programs, and a cashless welfare card (Altman and Hinkson 2007). In May 2017, Aboriginal people advocating for recognition issued the “Uluru Statement from the heart”, seeking constitutional reforms, and the establishment of a Makarrata (reconciliation) Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between government and First Nations – and, crucially, “truth-telling” about Australian history (Davis and Williams 2015; Appleby and Davis 2008). The Uluru Statement builds upon a series of important public debates about diverse forms of acknowledgement and remembrance, and establishes the past as central to the Australian present, and future.

Map 1. Australia (showing places mentioned in the text). Drawn by Lucia Clayton

Indigenous people and photography

Against this historical and political background, Indigenous people engage with photographic digital heritage in sophisticated and specific ways. Australian Indigenous practices work to reverse colonial flows, countering the movement of photographs, from community to circle the globe, and from Indigenous structures of knowledge embedded in Country and kinship, to become embedded in imperial systems of hierarchical knowledge. Yet these practices entail a new and disruptive temporality that disputes modernity’s linear logic with its derogation of Indigenous belatedness, instead insisting on the past in the present, for the future (Lydon 2015). Digitization enables historical photographs to live in the present, available to family and community at the touch of a button. By calling these images home, within a larger context of repatriating or returning objects and ancestral

remains, Indigenous Australians are working toward self-determination and a better future for their children.

As Lien and Nielsson (forthcoming) have noted, Indigenous practices surrounding photography broaden attention away from canonical European images and debates to a global visual field, power relations, and the impact of photographic imagery. Indigenous populations, including Sámi peoples in the Nordic countries, the Inuits of Greenland and Canada, and the First Nations peoples of the Canadian North West, the American Midwest, and Australian Aboriginal peoples have all been subjected to the multiple agendas of colonialism's photographic culture. As Elizabeth Edwards (forthcoming) argues, the canonical "Euro-American" photographic analytic apparatus is inadequate to questions regarding "the theoretical implications and underlying pulses of, for instance, claiming ancestors, the assertion of identities and the telling of histories". How do they change our conceptual frameworks and analyses? Such problems are reinforced by global intellectual hierarchies that privilege global rankings and supposedly "universal" measures of research excellence, which in practice privilege Anglo-American, or European scholarship and Western epistemologies.² A few studies seek to build on both contemporary theories of (digital) photography and social media as well as Māori and Aboriginal worldviews: Haidy Geismar (2015) and Christopher Morton (2015) for example argue for an understanding of digital images as forging a powerful experience of co-presence within traditional social networks. However, as historians such as Samoan New Zealander, Toeolesulusulu Damon Salesa (2012; Tuhiwai Smith 2012) have pointed out, indigenous ways of knowing continue to be excluded from imperialist historiographies. This is a refusal to acknowledge that European thought may be renewed from the margins – diverse as these are too (Chakrabarty 2000).

In this way, for example, the analysis of Australian Indigenous engagement with photography has tended to emphasize the predatory, exploitative role of photography, and the imperial perspective of the photographer within a "hostile" or "suspicious" interpretive tradition, that became especially dominant from the postmodernist 1980s (e.g. Sontag 1977; Rosler 1981; Tagg 1988). This stance characterized studies of photography and Indigeneity globally, such as James Faris' magisterial 1993 study of the Navajo peoples of the Southwestern United States, where he argued that photographic discourse reflects Western, rather than Navajo "reality", and was pessimistic about the possibility of reclamation or recuperation (Faris 1996, 11-12, 33-34). Significant shifts in interpretation since the turn of the millennium – in part due to an awareness of diverse cultural perspectives upon the medium - have seen an emphasis on understanding photographs' *effects* as they circulate within visual economies, rather than authorial intention, or the image's meaning within Western representation (e.g., see contributions to Pasternak 2020, 327-448). Important work has

drawn our attention to photography's emancipatory potential, and the ways that photography may enable forms of civic spectatorship and "visual citizenship" (e.g. Telesca 2013; Linfield 2011). Ariella Azoulay for example argues that the ideas, practices and effects that comprise visual culture give form to the civil – or the "interest that citizens display in themselves, in others and in their shared forms of coexistence" (2012, 5). Hariman and Lucaites (2016) also suggest that images are critical in defining categories of citizenship, and in justifying who may be considered as deserving of citizenship's entitlements: while images may exclude certain groups from citizenship and its rights, they also work powerfully to create imagined communities. Scholarly analysis of the Indigenous uses of photography has therefore been entwined with this broad shift from emphasizing oppression, to acknowledging the democratizing potential of the medium – even while contributing to our understanding of the historical and contemporary forms of exploitation that continue in an only gradually postcolonizing society (e.g., Peers forthcoming; Lonetree 2019; Edwards 2016; Lydon, 2005). Such concerns are linked to widespread debates regarding globalization, as scholars differ regarding whether distinctive Indigenous perspectives upon new media technologies such as mobile phones either incorporate and transform Indigenous visual traditions, or are incorporated into and enhance local cultural forms (Hinkson 2020).

Traditionally, for many Australian Aboriginal people, photographs are not merely representations, as in the Western tradition, but may assume the powers of the ancestors, embedded within social relationships with both the living and the dead. Australian Indigenous views challenge Cartesian dualisms that oppose material and intangible heritage, through bridging human and non-human worlds (Akagawa and Smith 2018). Traditionally, systems of knowledge in Aboriginal societies are land-based, and structured by their relationship with the ancestral powers, or "Dreamings", who created the world as they walked the earth, making places, people and culture, and marking the signs of their activities into the earth (Rose 1996, 2000). Rock art is one form of Dreamings, as are many landscape features which appear "natural" to Europeans. Aboriginal people re-unite with Dreamings and articulate relationships to people and place by replicating the movements of the ancestral beings – making these designs on the body, in sand, or on canvases for the art market (Watson 2003).

It is important not to conflate hundreds of Indigenous nations across Australia and Torres Strait, however the example of the Warlpiri of central Australia exemplifies this essential connection, and points toward the significance and complexity of visual culture and its role in mediating Warlpiri experience. As Melinda Hinkson (2014, 7) explains of crayon drawings on paper,

A picture of a place is inextricably tied to the people of that place; the two are treated in relational terms. Acts of picturing are acts of making and remaking these relationships. A picture of a place signals the authority of specific persons to draw, paint, sing and dance particular Dreamings, ancestral bodies of law, and their related tracts of country. A portrait of a person points not only to the portrayed individual but to a related group of people and the country to which they are inextricably tied. The making, display and circulation of pictures are thus matters of high order significance; Warlpiri pictures enact principles of the wider Warlpiri social order.

Therefore, within Warlpiri reckoning, representations such as names and images remain essentially connected to what is shown (Hinkson 2014, 7). This connection is central to many Aboriginal cultures, and is evident in a range of practices. For example, the link between name and person traditionally triggered a mourning period in many Aboriginal nations in which imaging or naming the deceased was prohibited, noted from the earliest days of encounter with colonists: during the early 1840s, for example, Tenbury, an elder of the Ngaiawang people of the lower Murray River in South Australia explained how the death of his son Torpool, meaning “teal”, led them to stop using this word for ducks, instead referring to them as “tilquaitch” (Eyre 1964, 355). This prohibition was subsequently applied to Western representations such as photographs, leading to the current practice of including “cultural warnings” about imaging the deceased at the start of many films and books. Yet such prohibitions have become much less uniform across Aboriginal Australia, and indeed, in some places may be reversed, for example through incorporating images of the deceased into funerary practices (e.g. Deger 2006, 2016; Gurrumuruwuy et al 2020). The custom of “warning” has become rote, frequently taking the place of direct engagement with Aboriginal communities and Indigenous decision-making. Even where such images represent people who passed away beyond living memory, this warning has become a gesture of respect and acknowledgement.

Interest in Indigenous media engagement intensified during the 1970s as audiovisual communications technologies expanded across the world, and “isolated” Aboriginal communities joined national and global networks. During the 1980s the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme led to the distribution of basic television and radio broadcasting equipment to more than a hundred small Aboriginal communities, prompting indigenous peoples to adopt recording technologies for their own diverse purposes. The introduction of broadcasting was seen to threaten Indigenous visual culture through incorporation by capitalist media ideology - yet media activism was also seen as a means of empowerment (Ginsburg 1991; Hinkson 2020). Such analyses were informed by media studies, and by directing their attention to *what people did with media*,

anthropologists revealed the efficacy of media as “carriers of social norms and the diversity of audience responses to media messages” (Hinkson 2020, 8).

In Australia, a range of studies exposed the historical and persisting exclusion of Indigenous people within the 1980s theoretical paradigm, emphasizing photographic technologies as repressive, and tracing the potential damage inflicted by neo-colonial representation. This concern was central to Eric Michaels’ landmark collaboration with the Warlpiri, where he studied the impact of television within a broader ethnography of media usage. This concern was enhanced by the Warlpiri traditional visual economy, shared with many Australian Aboriginal cultures, in which sacred meaning may be concealed from the viewer, revealed only when and to whom it is appropriate (e.g., Myers 2014). Similarly, the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land call the sacred dimensions of stories and images that cannot be made public the “inside” of these images, that is, “the deeper meanings associated with powerful, ancestrally significant events that belong in ceremony” (Deger 2016; Morphy 1991); images’ different layers of meaning are understood differentially according to who is permitted to see and understand them. In this way Warlpiri tradition has placed a high priority on restricting the circulation of knowledge along axes of gender, generation, and kinship, and especially ritual knowledge and images and names of deceased persons. Michaels (1986, 1994) conceived mass media as an informational system that operated according to a profoundly different, Western, logic, and he argued that Warlpiri needed to be supported to deploy media in support of their own cultural imperatives within their own community.

Yet rather than preserving “pure” or “traditional” culture, media shapes and mediates discourses of culture and tradition. As Faye Ginsberg (1991) pointed out, the term “indigenous media”, relies on the notion of cultural difference as autonomous, bounded, and static, and fails to account for its fundamentally intercultural nature. The tension between loss and change remains a central theme, as indigenous Australians negotiate their Aboriginality across a mediascape in which local meanings intersect with wider discourses.

Digital heritage

Today there is growing acknowledgement of the potential of photographic resources as a form of Indigenous advocacy, heritage and history-making, family (re)connection, and assertion of agency, survival and sovereignty. As Hinkson argues (2020, 9), “Indigenous media has come to be recognized as a diffuse and potent site of cultural expression, a repository of earlier ways of life, and a means by which otherwise marginalized people can participate in the world at large.” New Zealand Māori scholars Ngarino Ellis and Natalie Robertson (2018, 239) suggest that “Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay’s conception of ‘camera as a friend’ displaces Sontag’s idea of the camera as a weapon,

arriving at a new proposition of the camera as part of the extended family.” These diverging photographic epistemologies reinforce the need to challenge the cultural hegemony of European photographic theory, and to re-centre indigenous ways of knowing.

A growing body of research has demonstrated that for Aboriginal communities, individuals, families and artists, digitized photographic archives offer a rich source of history, counter silence and exclusion, and provide a means to explore many issues that remain in the present. Archival images are tangible and powerful relics that provide a link with the past and bring it concretely into our time. Crucially, digitization challenges the temporality of colonialism, and its reliance upon a linear conception of progress which relegates the Indigenous to a perpetual belatedness (Barlow 2007, Chakrabarty 2000). By disrupting this linear temporality, digitized photographs produce an alternative Indigenous space – or what theorist Homi Bhabha (1994, 235-56) terms the postcolonial ‘time lag’, a hybrid postcolonial moment of delay between the signifier and the signified. In this lag, digital heritage images de-stabilize and undo what once seemed the inevitable narrative flow of colonial progress, providing a sense of cultural diversity and possibility. In this way they breach colonial myths of progress- but more importantly for Indigenous viewers, they produce more satisfying, multi-temporal stories that bridge past and present, and (re)connect people and culture.

In the present, digitized photographs address absence, reconnect relatives with each other and to Country, and enhance wellbeing. As Wiradjuri (western New South Wales) scholar Lawrence Bamblett argues, photographs link people in the present, as well as connecting them to places and the past; they “fit into the joyful scene of people telling stories” (2014, 76). The history of broken families and the dispossession and control of Aboriginal people remain contested, and often absent, from national stories and visual histories, but these silences are filled by the solidity and presence of photographs. Perhaps paradoxically, the transformation from physical object to digital entity allows the gaps and absences of colonial narratives to be filled with solidity.

Archival restitution

As noted above, where Aboriginal world views bridge human and non-human, tangible and intangible worlds, digital heritage poses some interesting conundrums. Archival returns, or restitution, have become a significant practice for Indigenous peoples in many settler-colonial contexts. Facilitated by rapidly developing digital technologies, a profound shift in management practices within Australian cultural institutions since the 1990s has enabled the return of archives comprising documents, images - including photographs of objects and other materials – and audio-visual recordings.

Digital heritage differs significantly from tangible patrimony, although often treated as part of a continuum of cultural material, including long-standing work to repatriate ancestral remains and cultural objects (see for example Fforde et al. 2020; Turnbull 2017; Thomas 2015; PARADISEC 2020; *Return Reconcile Renew* <https://returnreconcilerenew.info>). Pickering (2020, 10) uses the term “digital restitution” to distinguish digital returns from “repatriation”, which he argues should only apply to the return of ownership of original items such as Ancestral Remains.³ Restitution work includes returning sound recordings and documentation of languages to communities of origin (e.g., Bracknell and Scott 2019; Brown and Treloyn 2017; Treloyn and Emberly 2013). However many “repatriation” projects are gradually being recorded in digital form, including through documenting the welcome home ceremonies in home communities (e.g. Thomas 2007).

A very wide range of projects have now aimed to make historic materials, and especially photographs accessible to descendants and communities using digital tools, including research projects, government initiatives, and community-driven initiatives (e.g., Ginsburg 2008; Christen 2012; Geismar 2013; Anderson and Montenegro 2017). These contemporary practices of archival return have been described as “casting memories of the past into the future” (Barwick et al 2019), but pose “conundrums” such as the loss of provenance information, meaning that they may never find reconnection to the individuals and communities of their origin. Like the heritage regime more broadly, this problem is exacerbated by the discrepancy between living social context, and a reified heritage apparatus (Cameron 2007, 174). This stance derives from the salvage paradigm in which ethnographers sought to record “tradition” through photography even as they participated in change (Edwards 2001). This produces a contrast between what Barwick et al (2019, 2) define as either “face-to-face systems”, which depend on human interaction and which emphasize process, with “document-based systems such as institutional archives”, which emphasize “products”, or the traces of human activity encoded in material or electronic media.

Similarly, we now understand archives as the embodiment of social or cultural practices of record-keeping, and we acknowledge the ways that they are constructed in multiple contextual ways over time and space (McKemmish et al 2011). Such challenges have prompted varied innovative and ethically driven responses, seeking to develop “tactile, material, and embodied ethical practices of curation” that include “cultural, ethical, and historical checks at each step” in a relational model built on reciprocity that Christen (2018, 400) terms “digital heritage stewardship”. However it must be noted that despite the universally positive (self)evaluations of these digital return projects (including my own), which emphasize the benefits for Indigenous people, their use and effects on Aboriginal communities generally remain private and therefore difficult to assess from outside.

Ara Irititja: life and loss

In the context of colonial legacies of abuse and stereotyping, anxieties surrounding the process of digital return of historic images have centered upon control, and the right to make decisions about collection management. One of the first, and most prominent restitution projects in Australia is Ara Irititja, meaning “stories from a long time ago” in the language of Anangu (Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people [NPY]) of central Australia (Ara Irititja 2020) (Map 1). Its purpose is “to deliver back home materials of cultural and historical significance to Anangu”, using interactive multimedia software now known as “Keeping Culture KMS”. The materials include photographs, films, sound recordings and documents, which are digitally stored alongside other contemporary items within a purpose-built computer archive and returned to Anangu. The archive originated in 1994 as an extension of land rights activism in the region, as elders became increasingly aware of the “lost” or scattered collections of photographs that had been taken on their Country, aided by anthropologist Ushma Scales, archivist John Dallwitz, and information technology (IT) professionals. Ara Irititja’s multimedia digital archive designed at the request of NPY or Anangu communities. The project began with thousands of “photographs of various formats, hundreds of hours of film and sound, documents, books, magazines, diaries and artworks”, requiring digitization and inclusion within a database that accommodates different media, incorporates cultural restrictions, and is easy to use for an audience with “limited literacy and often, failing eyesight”. The interface and database storage structure reflect each of the separate media types, Photos, Documents, Movies, Sounds and Objects, facilitating cross-referencing and access (Ara Irititja 2020). Ara Irititja remains private, but NPY “recognise the need to share” and the project therefore provides an extensive knowledge base for education. Recently the project has created an App named Ara Winki no 1 (figure 1) which is a multilingual educational tool for Anangu youth and an introduction to life on the APY Lands for the broader public (Lowish, Dallwitz, and Dallwitz 2019).

This project is explicitly a heritage initiative. As Ara Irititja (2020) explains, “Anangu are passionate about protecting their past, accessing it today and securing it for future generations”. Maintaining NPY’s ancient cultural information systems, the database integrates cultural restrictions of access to some knowledge on the basis of seniority and gender. Photographs, for Ara Irititja, are “objectifications of Anangu knowledge, culture, relationships, custodianship of and responsibility for land, community, and personhood” (Thorner et al 2019, 254). Through its collaborative, intercultural approach to archiving, in conjunction with the affordances of digital media, the project facilitates negotiations that are “culturally appropriate, and not threatening”: for

example, because of the traditional prohibition on naming or picturing the deceased, the project now incorporates “advance directives on what to do with representations of a person upon his/her death” (Thorner et al 2019, 280).

The Ara Irititja project is exemplary in its long-term, community-driven methods and protocols, the dedication of its non-Aboriginal allies who have sustained the project, and consequently its longevity, having been running for almost thirty years. Among its greatest challenges, as its website explains, is funding sustainability: in 2007, the South Australian State Government for the first time approved a four-year funding program, including a full-time salaried position auspiced by the South Australian Museum. However, the project relies on the uncertain financial support of the State and Federal Governments and philanthropic organizations (Ara Irititja 2020).

One thread running through much work in this domain is the apprehension of cultural loss. Ara Irititja is offered as a solution to the challenge of cultural endangerment and preservation. It asks, “HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?”, and explains that

from the late 20th Century, Anangu have become overwhelmed by cultural globalisation through national and international media. This has caused widespread concern among the elders of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands about the transmission of culture and language under contemporary conditions. In 2019 this issue is still critical. The senior Anangu who carry the culture are ageing and many are in failing health. When they are gone, the knowledge dies with them. Keeping Culture KMS software provides a means for this knowledge to be passed on through the use of contemporary technology. In addition, no central place or public institution exists, accessible to all Anangu, as a repository for APY cultural material. Keeping Culture KMS can provide this forever.

Using the vocabulary of world heritage, Ara Irititja defines its role in “safeguarding intangible cultural heritage” under the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and “the conservation of memory in a culture based on oral tradition.” The project locates itself as inheritor of “memory that goes beyond most cultural imaginations, back before the invention of writing, and many centuries before the Christian era. Every Anangu elder carries a story — one that has been handed down through many generations. In 2019 many of these stories still exist, but many are barely sustained. And beyond sadness, some are not. They are forever lost.” Ara Irititja offers itself as a resource for continuing cultural life, akin to Anangu language preservation, similarly

weakened by English language media, lack of access to language resources, and the breakdown of intergenerational transmission of culture.

Figure 1. Ara Winki no 1. Screenshot.

Storylines

Perhaps the most radical effect of Aṛa Irititja's digital heritage program has been to facilitate the replication of the original archive's structure - developed specifically for the APY nations of central Australia – for other, culturally diverse, Aboriginal nations spanning vast and widely-separated regions (Map 1). The *Storylines* archive managed by the State Library of Western Australia and launched in 2013 represents a local, stand-alone, recreation of the parent Aṛa Irititja, based upon the web application Keeping Culture KMS. As the Library explains (SLWA 2020), by digitizing previously physical archives and making them accessible across this vast region, it allows users from across the state to engage with Aboriginal stories, language, perspectives and history.

This online archive assists the digital return of photos and other materials to Aboriginal people reflecting diverse languages, stories and perspectives – for example by permitting the identification of people and places where this information was lost through colonial de-contextualization (figure 2). Facilitated by digitization, previously unknown Aboriginal photographers have emerged (as I explore further below) such as Ballardong Noongar Mavis Phillips, née Walley, whose collection is now incorporated within the State Library of Western Australia's *Storylines*. As a mother of 11, Mavis Walley took more than 300 photos with her Box Brownie camera at Goomalling, northeast of Perth, between the 1950s and 1970s. The collection was recently “discovered” when Mavis Walley's daughter, Dallas Phillips, brought along a tin containing her photographs to a history workshop held in Goomalling.

Storylines worked with Mavis Phillips's family to restore and disseminate 325 of these negatives in 2015. As Lucy Van (2019) argues, this collection represents a Ballardong Noongar point of view in its choice of subjects, composition, and style, expressing the joy and spontaneity of the photographer and her sitters (figure 3). In this way *Storylines* has given this digital photography archive simultaneously a national and public life, allowing a distinctively Aboriginal perspective to be represented while supporting it as a private family asset. In this way the historical absence of

Aboriginal photographers and their work from photographic histories is slowly being addressed, with their continuing “discovery” and inclusion within public spaces. The rich field of contemporary Indigenous photo-artists – practitioners such as Brook Andrew, Christian Thompson, and Dianne Jones – is thus accumulating a photographic genealogy.

Figure 2. Search interface for Storylines. Screenshot.

Figure 3. Mavis Walley, A group of children including Norma Phillips (middle back) standing in field of cape dandelion, 1950–60. Digital file from black and white negative. Mavis Walley Collection, State Library of Western Australia, Perth. Permission for reproduction granted by the family of Mavis Phillips nee Walley, and the State Library of Western Australia.

The first “remote” community the project trialed was the offshoot *Wurnannangga Storylines* Program at Mowanjum Community from 2014, comprising Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunambal tribal groups. Although they co-exist alongside each other at the current location some 10 kms from Derby (Map 1), these groups share a fragmented history stemming from the enforced movement from their ancestral lands during the twentieth century (Jebb 2008). Now known as Dolord Mindi (the Cave) at the Mowanjum Community Collection and Media Space (MAACC), these archives contain historical and cultural material collected since the 1970s, and inspired by diverse cultural projects such as a Junba (a form of storytelling through traditional song and dance) recording project with individual community members between 2000-2002 (Treloyn 2003).

Wurnannangga Storylines contributed to building “community capacity through the training and employment of local workers and through providing a focus for governance and ownership of cultural heritage materials” (Kral 2015, 54). The archive’s contents remain private and securely managed within the community rather than being accessible for public viewing. Other important examples have emerged, such as the free, mobile, and open source platform Mukurtu (MOOK-oo-too), built with Indigenous communities to manage and share digital cultural heritage, especially photographs.⁴

Returning photos

In a slightly different approach, working from European collections back to their sites of production, the *Returning Photos: Australian Aboriginal Photos from European Collections* project which I led between 2011-2017, drew upon the process of digitization to transform physical photographic archives into a digital heritage resource. *Returning Photos* worked with four European museums to research and digitize the photographs in order to return them to Indigenous descendants: the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Musée de Quai Branly in Paris, France, and the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures) in Leiden, The Netherlands. Digitization of these historic photos has enabled researchers to explore the global circulation of photographs of Australian Aboriginal people that began in the 1840s, and to connect their local production to their concrete effects as objects circulated through global circuits.

By retrieving these physical objects from four disparate and widely-separated archives, this project aimed to collate and analyze them through a new-found digital equivalence. As a coherent, online, collectively searchable resource, this body of visual heritage for the first time enabled analysis of the distribution of photographs across these European sites – and conversely, their origins and local meanings. This digital transformation, from photographic objects to online screen has enabled new research focused on local communities in every state and region in Australia, and a range of new uses, from art, to native title. Where previously researchers travelled from Australia to metropolitan centers to view and re-connect with these prints – many of which had remained unidentified and were inaccessible to visitors – now they may be accessed from computers within Aboriginal families' lounge-rooms and local community centers.

For example, several portraits of senior Ngaiwong man Tenberry (c1798-1855) from Moorundie, on the Murray River, were produced and circulated through imperial networks of science and governance from around 1845. Through digitizing his portraits, it became possible to assemble them as a series, prompting focused research about this important Indigenous Elder and colonial intermediary, and the return of his historical portrait to descendants through the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association. Tenberry's early photographic portrait had been pasted on to a cardboard sheet and boxed within Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum's archive, where it was unknown to all but curators (figures 4 and 5). Digitization through the *Returning Photos* project prompted research to recover Tenberry's life story, and established his photographic portrait as the earliest such image from South Australia (Braithwaite, Gara and Lydon 2011) (Figure 6). Today, he has been reclaimed by descendants as an important ancestor, and his portrait – still physically housed in Oxford – has been incorporated into the film *Bloodline*, an educational resource designed to communicate with outsiders, but also to teach the younger generation about their history and culture.

Figure 4. Box 49 (Australia) Courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1998.249.33. Thanks to the Mannum Aboriginal Community Association, which represents the Nganguraku and Ngaiwong people, for their permission to reproduce the images of Tenberry.

Figure 5. Archive card 33, from Box 49 (Australia), showing pasted grouping of photographs, Courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1998.249.33.

Figure 6. Portrait of Tenberry, taken in South Australia sometime before his death in 1855. (Courtesy Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1998.249.33.1)

Unlike projects originating within Indigenous communities, distinctive challenges for this approach include intensive collections-based research to identify and contextualize photographs which had lost provenance; forming relationships of trust and genuine collaboration with many Indigenous communities rather than working closely with one especially given the global scale of these networks; diverse Indigenous cultural protocols surrounding imagery, which are important, highly variable and include rapidly-changing practices such as prohibitions upon viewing the recently deceased (e.g. Deger 2006; Nakata et al 2008).

For Aboriginal people, this work has provided access to previously unknown archives, generating new forms of heritage and history. Aboriginal people have explained the importance of recovering such images in their quest to re-connect with family and place (e.g., Lydon 2014). For example, AIATSIS (2015) cites the project as best practice in its guidelines for ethical research. The four museums involved evaluated the outcomes very positively, reporting increased knowledge of their collections, awareness and use by Indigenous communities, and stronger relations with Australian indigenous groups which have in turn informed other global outreach relations (Lydon 2019).

However, the project is limited at the Australian end by unidentified people, or “orphan” images, and lack of continuing support for maintaining and facilitating the interface with communities. The project is now hosted by the Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia, and has been linked to the National Library of Australia’s family history resources for ATSI people (NLA 2020 <https://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/indigenous-family-history/pictures-and-photographs>). One feature of the database is a portal allowing users to provide annotations identifying or adding information to database entries, in the hope that the number of orphan images may be reduced.

While this wave of digital restitution makes heritage more accessible, the ongoing “digital divide” (Rennie et al 2016) and other challenges associated with telecommunications in remote Indigenous communities persist. Digital access to heritage – as for other forms – is shaped by language, culture, and geopolitics, and so social and cultural access may be difficult. Continuing challenges include reliable funding, and the considerable proportion of unidentified material requiring research and collaboration with Indigenous communities to accomplish re-connection – even where this is possible. Most of all, the interface between collections and communities is crucial: without active and enabling interpersonal relationships, “even the most technologically capable or culturally responsive collections may remain silos” and reify culture rather than supporting its vitality (Brown and Treloyn 2017, 59; Treloyn and Emberly 2013; Campbell 2014). This remains a tension for these digital heritage projects as for heritage more generally, as the national framework does not adequately meet Indigenous objectives and values. Beyond the parameters of national cultural institutions, Aboriginal families and individuals have deployed digital photographic assets to challenge oppressive state narratives and strengthen communities. All of these photographic archives make these images available for both traditional and new purposes, from re-connection to family and Country, to producing art, pursuing native title claims, and within activist campaigns.

Family history and the Stolen Generations

By making photographs of Aboriginal people more accessible, the colonial archive has been transformed into a form of heritage eagerly mined by descendants seeking to reconstruct family histories. A seismic shift in public debate was prompted by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, and its 1997 report, *Bringing Them Home*, which revealed the effects of official processes of assimilation— now known as the Stolen Generations – and made a huge public impact. Aboriginal people had of course always known these

terrible stories of forcible separation and the trauma that resulted, and using Indigenous testimony in conjunction with traditional archival evidence the inquiry documented the impacts of assimilation, noting that after 1948 these official practices were in breach of Australia's commitment to an international human rights legal framework. *Bringing Them Home* drew upon research in the field of adoption showing the importance of information about one's natural parents and heritage, and often, of reunion, to most adoptees, who feel a deep emotional and psychological need to know about their origins. The value of archives for re-connecting families was therefore a key principle of the recommendations, and as a result a network of such services was funded through the National Link-Up Program.

An important aspect of this process of re-connection is the use of photographs, taken for diverse purposes under a colonial regime, but now increasingly accessible through digitization and archival return projects. One important initiative was undertaken in 1998 by the Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia in direct response to the *Bringing Them Home* report, aiming to share its historical photographs from Western Australia with Aboriginal families (Stanton 2003). The wave of digitization since the early 2000s has opened up these collections to descendants, allowing them to engage with and transform the colonial archive. For descendants and relatives, these photographs have become family portraits, and evidence for Indigenous survival (e.g. figure 3) (e.g. Brown and Peers 2006; Goodall 2006; Lydon 2014; Lydon and Oxenham forthcoming; Poignant 1996; Smith 2003).

Recent research has also begun to identify early Aboriginal photographers, such as Mavis Walley, noted above, whose photographs recorded Indigenous families and lives beyond the purview of the state. Once digitized and generously shared, these precious private collections are becoming part of the mainstream Australian past, documenting Indigenous lives, family, and values. For example, Charlotte Richards was a prolific Ngarrindjeri (South Australian) photographer from the 1940s to the 1980s. Born around 1930, Richards grew up in "fringe" camps along the Murray River and Coorong, having been excluded, like many other Aboriginal people, from the region's towns by official policy and popular prejudice. She was unusual in not having children to support, and used her income derived from sewing bags and picking fruit to pay for her photography, and to share the results among her kin. Her family remembers her love of camp life, "fishing and rabbiting" and her strict care for her collection of photos, now a unique record of life beyond official surveillance, that constitutes a familial, not government archive. Ngarrindjeri elders explain that the photographs "carry a life-force similar to that of semi-sacred customary objects", evoking kin, asserting an Indigenous worldview, and demonstrating Ngarrindjeri sovereignty (Hughes and Trevorrow 2018, 250).

As they have become more widely disseminated through digital returns, photographs have also become useful for activism and campaigns for justice (Lydon 2012). For example, photographs have played an important role in publicizing the West Australian Deaths in Custody case of Ms Dhu, a 22-year old Yamatji woman who was arrested for unpaid fines was taken to a south Hedland Police Station in 2014. Ms Dhu was already unwell, became very ill overnight and died. Her inhumane treatment from both the police and hospital staff during her incarceration was captured by CCTV cameras built into South Hedland's Police Station and Hospital, and when released to the public drew public attention to the violation of her rights in prison. Further, Ms Dhu's image was projected on to Perth's night-time city scape in a form of graffiti art to honor her death, providing a powerful memorial to her tragic death, and a reminder of the struggle for Indigenous rights (Lydon and Oxenham forthcoming; Blue 2017) (figure 7).

Figure 7. Image of Ms Dhu on city landscape. Photograph by Ethan Blue.

Yolŋu uses of digital media: Miyarrka Media

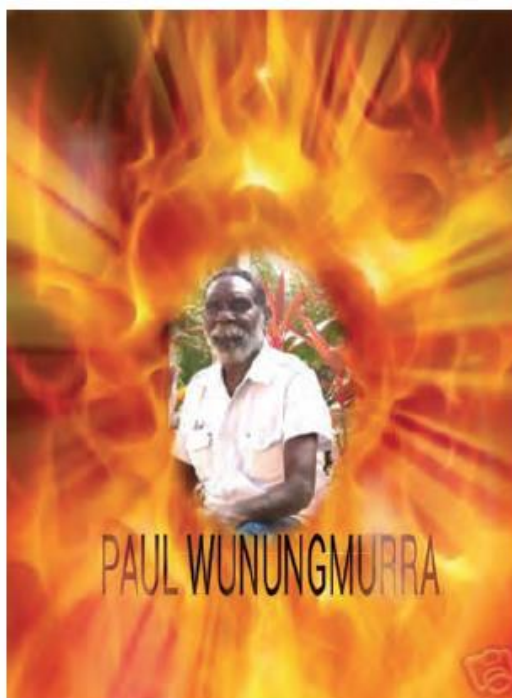
Finally, however, turning to the wider mediascape that we all now inhabit, it is possible to see how the accessibility of new media, and especially mobile phones, may constitute new forms of digital heritage independent of the state. Across remote Aboriginal Australia, phone and tablet photographic technologies are prompting the emergence of new genres that may be shared rapidly with family and friends through social networking sites. Jennifer Deger's work with Miyarrka Media in Gapuwiyak, Arnhem Land, examines a genre of Yolŋu photography that has emerged since mobile phones with touch screens and data plans enabled widespread access to photo-editing apps, allowing untrained photographers to "cut, paste, filter, frame, recolour, decorate and add text to family photographs", to create a distinctly Yolŋu genre of family portraiture (Deger 2016, 114; see also De Largy Healy 2013). In examining the specific relations photographs materialize on the screens of the makers and their close family members, Deger shows how screen-based photo applications are being used to assemble family photographs into what she terms "thick photography": something "more – something wider, something deeper, I hear my Yolŋu colleagues say – than the original, unadorned images" (2016, 112). Yolŋu media maker Paul Gurrumuruwuy notes that this is significant "because our culture is fading" (Gurrumuruwuy et al 2019, 44). Deger argues that it provides "a new means of stimulating a sensorium that extends beyond human bodies to include a sentient and feelingful landscape inhabited by generations past" (Deger 2013). In this way the Yolŋu are concerned less with

the image as a trace of a past moment, as with the effects of creative remediation on the present moment.

Their marvelous *Phone & Spear* project explores the further “outward” trajectories of these genres, richly depicting the image assemblages made by Yolŋu on mobile phones in an “art of connection” that draws together clan colors, totemic ancestors and kin (2020, xvii) (figures 8 and 9). As Warren Balpatji explains (Gurramuruwuy et al 2019, 90-91),

We are talking about spears now for this project because they are the fastest connection, they make connections with the land and the people. When those mokyuy [ancestral beings] threw their spears they created the land, the sacred objects and designs, the songs and the languages. There are different beliefs and different stories that belong to different clans. Different people, different clans, different bāpurru have different ways of looking at their life and stories. Dhuwa people especially have stories about spears.

Yolŋu use phones to connect them to the madayin [sacred objects], the *wāŋa*, the old people, their sacred patterns and identity. Deger (2016, 126) points out that the term “ancestral power” is frequently used by anthropologists to identify “both the source and subject of Yolŋu creativity”, but argues that such a formulation, in suggesting that Yolŋu art and ritual “depend entirely on the creative actions of those who came before” obscures the degree to which this runs both ways, as contemporary modes of creative engagement can “enliven current generations, the old people and country itself”. Acknowledging structural violence, intergenerational trauma and dislocation from homelands, the authors nevertheless insist on the vitality and renewal of relationships, so that even as the images, stories and ringtones that they share “acknowledge layers of loss, death and intergenerational friction”, they also mediate “forms of connectedness Yolŋu-style, with the effect of energising and affirming a social network of moral force and consequence with roots in the land and the sea” (Gurramuruwuy 2019, 80). In this articulation of Yolŋu forms of heritage, and its living, future-oriented uses of the past, we see a truly community-centered and relational engagement with the past enabled by digitization.



DHALWANU FIRE
Kayleen Djingadjingawuy Wanambi, 2016

Figure 8. Phone bitja. Miyarrka Media

Figure 9. Phone bitja. Miyarrka Media

Conclusion

Throughout these digital heritage projects, the tension between loss and change remains a central theme. Indigenous Australians negotiate their Aboriginality across a mediascape where local meanings intersect with wider discourses, inevitably prompting intercultural transformation. Yet in discussing these matters with Deger, Paul Gurrumuwuy (2019, 211-212) advanced a pragmatic, but fundamentally optimistic vision, agreeing,

I know what you mean, gäthu. I can see that the future is wrecked for the young people. I see that everywhere. I hope it doesn't come true. But for Yolŋu it doesn't matter how far you go, or how long you run, you are still in the foundation. You are walking with your identity, with your pattern, it's in your blood... It's all around, the pattern.' [Deger reflects,] I take this to mean that Yolŋu make and re-make their ancestrally ordered world, using photos, yet in

ways that engage with the outside world. They offer a Yolju example of the kinds of processes enacted across the hundreds of Indigenous traditions alive in Australia today, changing and 'modernizing' as they are.

Digital photographic archives enable a range of engagements with the past that revitalize culture in the present, and for the future, from making social relations, culture, art, and in education, to native title claims and activist campaigns. Photographs embody events and people that through digitization may disrupt the linear temporality of colonialism: bringing these reified fragments of the past into the present, they are re-contextualized in continuing relationships and practices directed toward the future. This affordance of digitization enhances and focuses the ways in which, for many Aboriginal people, relationships to people and place are ordered by ancestral imperatives, invoked through cultural performance and art. Such conceptions challenge linear Western concepts of time, bridging the separation of past, present and future that grounded definitions of heritage as material objects with "intrinsic" value.

The creative and dynamic uses of digital heritage I have reviewed here, including their present-centered, future-oriented stance, their transcendence of cartesian dualisms between human and non-human, material and intangible, and their incorporation of the sacred are now principles acknowledged by professional critical heritage scholars, and slowly, the post-colonizing Australian heritage regime. Just as critical heritage scholars now argue against tangible-intangible binaries, Indigenous world views effortlessly incorporate the digital to maintain and reinforce traditional practices, even as these are transformed through intercultural relationships.

Over the last two decades these important and innovative initiatives grounded in new digital technologies have produced new forms of heritage archive, enabling new tools, narratives and perspectives to emerge. A range of remarkable archival restitution projects have been developed by researchers committed to supporting communities, enhancing museum work and engagement; many "return" or "repatriation" projects focus on access and questions of "data sovereignty" and decision-making: who should control cultural materials, who should, or might be entitled to see images, integrated into sophisticated legal and regulatory programs and creative digital platforms.

Against the brutal history of colonization and its legacies, digital heritage is used by Aboriginal people to understand and narrate the past for present-day purposes such as educating the young, and creating a community and a world still shaped by cultural imperatives. Dynamic processes of family history research and reclamation counter the fragmentation of the Stolen Generations and other oppressive colonial legacies; the power of the image to stand for what is missing is deployed to re-connect to family and Country. Photographic digital heritage is also used in responding to

demands for Truth-telling, and a more inclusive national history that acknowledges Indigenous perspectives and experience.

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Film

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Notes

¹ The term “Aboriginal” is generally used as an umbrella term to cover the Indigenous nations of mainland Australia and Tasmania, but not including those of the Torres Strait. Here I use the broader term “Indigenous” for all of Australia’s first nations, that is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples.

² For example, The Leiden Principles have recently offered a program for researchers to “hold evaluators to account”, including through the protection of “excellence in locally relevant research”, noting that “in many parts of the world, research excellence is equated with English-language publication.” These biases are particularly problematic in the social sciences and humanities, in which research is more regionally and nationally engaged. Diana Hicks, Paul Wouters, “The Leiden Manifesto for research metrics”, *Nature*, April 23, 2015, vol. 520, 429.

³ Increasingly, physical heritage is also being digitized to produce new heritage archives: for example, AIATSIS is currently leading a program which seeks to return objects, archival records, audiovisual items and artwork held in overseas collecting institutions to its Traditional Custodians and Owners. The Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) project has also developed an Online Heritage Resource Manager (OHRM) database to manage, store and visualize the collection information gathered by AIATSIS, which will transform materials such as artefacts and art into new photographic digital heritage archives (Ley et al. 2020).

⁴ Mukurtu is a “grassroots project aiming to empower communities to manage, share, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways”. Mukurtu CMS is managed at Washington State University, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Similarly, through digital tags termed “TK Labels” the *Local Contexts* initiative, hosted by New York University, provides a means to add missing information about culturally and community specific protocols about access, circulation, and use of Indigenous digital heritage materials in the public domain or held by others (Anderson and Christen 2013).