

Curating with Community

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Abstract:

Libraries have undergone rapid and exciting changes in the last decade. Their role has expanded beyond just collecting and preserving material, to actively engaging communities and curating their collections. While these ongoing changes have been largely successful, there remains a considerable disconnect between cultural institutions and Indigenous peoples.

It is now widely understood that access to material which reflects a person's culture and history can play a profound role in determining their social, cultural and emotional wellbeing. The problem lies in the fact that for many Aboriginal people this material is hidden behind cultural, lingual and physical barriers; largely accessible to everyone but the people it relates to. If Indigenous peoples are expected to play a greater role in determining the future of these collecting institutions, there must first be some basic structures in place. Photographs and other heritage materials must be released back into Indigenous communities and Indigenous peoples must have a larger stake in the curation of Aboriginal heritage materials.

Historically a large amount of Aboriginal heritage material has been donated by non-Aboriginal people, and items have little in the way of identification, or context – often with simple captions such as “Blacks, WA” or “Man, Kimberley, 1940”. Comparatively, heritage material relating to non-Aboriginal people is often identified with incredible detail and accompanied by rich, primary sources including diaries, letters and notes.

Barriers to access are further complicated by a number of other factors, in particular literacy and language. For many Aboriginal people Standard Australian English is not as important as traditional Aboriginal language(s), and efforts to promote English literacy can be seen as holdovers from the previous ‘assimilation approach’ to education and administration. Additionally, English may be a second, third or fourth language and speakers may not be confident in their understanding and use of English in formal settings such as libraries and schools. For this reason Storylines is being trialled as a tool for engaging Aboriginal people in digital and information literacies – literacies which have the potential to transcend traditional lingual barriers.

The State Library of Western Australia's Storylines project is directly challenging these barriers by working with Indigenous communities, organisations and families to reinterpret collections, develop community capacity and return historical material. Complementary programs, including family history sessions, information literacy training and photo identification workshops, are informing the State Library's ongoing development of policies and frameworks in relation to collections, engagement models and service delivery. These activities are also building the confidence and capacity of Aboriginal clients; empowering people to discover photographs of their ancestors, and to share their own stories, knowledge and histories.

The Storylines Project seeks to restore balance to these heritage collections and create a truly inclusive Western Australian history. This paper will explore some of the effects the project is having on both the State Library and Aboriginal communities, with a particular focus on the curation of inclusive collections and the creation of culturally relevant literacy and learning opportunities.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Photographs, Inclusivity, Digital Archive, Repatriation.

*Please be aware that this paper contains images and names of persons who are now deceased.
Use your discretion when viewing or sharing these photographs.*

Background:

In recent years the Library and Information Sector has undergone rapid changes largely in response to new technologies and growing community information needs. The age of the internet has well and truly arrived, bringing with it new ways of managing information and knowledge, and endless new possibilities for community engagement. In the past libraries often occupied a position of power, historically being the only place where the community could freely access information and knowledge. From this privileged position the rules of how information is described, catalogued, stored and referenced were written – shaping the various systems still largely in operation today.

The Dewey Decimal System (DDC), for example, is the product of a 19th century Western literacy culture which alternately ignored and fetishized Indigenous peoples. It remains the cornerstone of the Western library system and is used to organise information and knowledge in libraries throughout the Australia and the world. During the late 19th century Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous peoples were studied and catalogued – collections were built *about* them, but not *for* or *with* them - and this approach is reflected in the catalogue headings and structure of the DDC. The overt and systemic racism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries may not be readily apparent, but its influence on the development of Western classification systems cannot be ignored. Hope Olsen explains that “the problem of bias in classification can be linked to the nature of classification as a social construct. It reflects the same biases as the culture that creates it.”¹. There have been numerous critiques of the DDC which point out its inadequate representation of not only Indigenous people, but also gay men and women², senior citizens and people with disabilities. It was originally published in 1876 and suffice it to say things have changed more than a little bit since then.

When looking at heritage collections (in particular photographic material) the rules of 'Dewey' don't usually apply, but there are equally pervasive and archaic systems at work. The Library of Congress subject headings (only about 20 years younger than the DDC) are very widely used and while exhaustive, were not designed to accommodate Indigenous knowledge or perspectives. They represent a Western approach to information management which prioritizes lists and classifications³, and works to standardize subjects and quantify knowledge. This is in stark opposition to Indigenous knowledge systems which are more flexible and dynamic; reflecting the changing

¹ Olsen, 1998.

² Ibid.

³ Mazzocchi, 2006.

physical and spiritual landscapes of Indigenous Australians⁴. These systems recall the anthropological and ethnological approaches to quantifying Indigenous culture which were rife in Australia in the first half of the 20th century – an era in which Indigenous people were dehumanized and studied relentlessly, and a period in Australian history which remains painful and contentious.

Thousands of recordings and photographs which currently reside in library collections around Australia were a product of this era and the many attempts to record the last words of a 'dying culture'; the notion of "smoothing the dying pillow"⁵. The assumption that Indigenous culture was becoming extinct imbued these materials with an exotic significance, and meant that any efforts to ensure knowledge stayed protected and in the hands of Indigenous owners was seen as futile. 'Experts' would instead curate this material to ensure that it survived. Consequently the narrative of Indigenous history was controlled by non-Indigenous people for many years, and in some cases separated entirely from the cultural and personal histories of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and individuals who lived and experienced it.

Library services in Western Australia

In the Western Australian context libraries and library services have historically existed as government initiatives. They were established through legislation and managed by government employees⁶, existing very much as government entities. Even today library services are largely run by the state or local government and operated as community services. In regional and remote areas of Western Australia it is not uncommon for library services to be physically co-located with the local government or shire office⁷. This close relationship with government can be problematic for Indigenous people, particularly in Western Australia where there is a painful history of government oversight over Indigenous peoples' lives⁸. Government buildings have not historically been welcoming places for Indigenous people and for some communities this avoidance has become second nature. This is not only true for remote areas, but also urban and suburban ones where Indigenous engagement is an ongoing challenge for local library services.

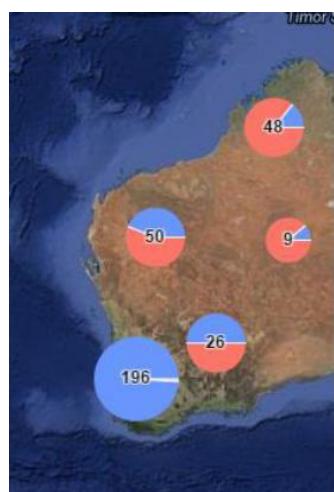


Figure 1: Ratio of library services to Indigenous Communities in Western Australia.

Overcoming these historical barriers is only the first step in creating inclusive library spaces and services. To compound these inherited issues there are also significant geographical, language and cultural barriers which further distance Indigenous communities from library services and collections. In the Kimberley region of Western Australia (*Figure 1*) there are 28 spoken Indigenous languages⁹ spread across more than 420,000 square kilometres (about a third of the size of South Africa). Less than 50,000 people live in around 100 communities spread throughout the Kimberley, many of which are more than 500 kilometres from a library service. The entirety of the region is serviced by only 6 public libraries - which would be comparable to having only 18 public libraries for the entire geographical area of South Africa¹⁰ (which currently has more than 1500 library services).

This presents a significant challenge and requires a flexible and inclusive approach to library services and spaces. These barriers have historically meant that Indigenous awareness of library collections and services is far less pervasive, and that Indigenous people are less likely to regularly use a local library service. This is particularly problematic

⁴ Nakata, 2005.

⁵ Wilkie, M., 2006.

⁶ Library Board of Western Australia Act, 1951.

⁷ Roebourne, Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek library services are all co-located with government/shire buildings.
All of these libraries are in areas with significant Indigenous populations.

⁸ Haebich, 1992.

⁹ Kimberley Language and Resource Centre, web site.

¹⁰ National Library Service of South Africa, 2013.

when you consider the fact that photographic and heritage collections have been donated predominantly by non-Indigenous people and are often unidentified and without context. The people who have the knowledge required to appropriately inform these heritage collections are also the people who are least likely to have access to them.

State Library of Western Australia

The State Library of Western Australia houses a significant collection of heritage materials including around 1,000,000 images. These images have been donated or acquired over the 125 year history of the library and are housed in the Alexander Library Building in Perth, Western Australia. Out of these thousands of photographic collections only a very small handful were donated by Indigenous people or organisations (estimated at less than 1 percent). Instead, the visual histories of stations, missions and communities have been documented by station owners, missionaries and anthropologists with little or no consultation of the Indigenous peoples and cultures depicted in the images (*figure 2*).

Compounding this issue is the fact that much of the State Library's photographic material was captioned by the original donor, or using information available at the time of donation. These historical captions retain all the inherent biases and discriminatory charm of the social context they were created in, relying on terminology and classification systems which are no longer adequate or appropriate. In many cases where librarians have had to 'fill in the gaps' while cataloguing heritage material, there has not been sufficient knowledge or experience to ensure that the curation is inclusive of Indigenous views, history and protocols.



Figure 2: Photograph of Aboriginal boys getting ready for a Corroboree (celebration). Identified by the original donor as simply 'Blacks, W.A'. (SLWA BA1823/36)

While access to most images is open and unrestricted (unless specifically stated otherwise) many images in the State Library collections can only be viewed in person, in the library building. This has meant that researchers, writers and historians (who are either centrally located, able to travel easily or highly personally motivated) have used and published these images over many years, while many Indigenous people remain unaware that images of themselves and their relatives are held in the library's collections. Importantly, this also means that any Indigenous perspectives, history or knowledge in these photos which has not yet been identified, referenced or acknowledged, will not form part of the new contexts that these images find themselves in – often further distancing the photograph from the original social and cultural contexts.

In light of these issues the State Library of Western Australia has undertaken a number of targeted projects with remote Aboriginal communities. Additionally the State Library works with National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA¹¹) in order to promote and embed established protocols and guidelines into standard library practice. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN) has developed a core set of protocols for library services working with Indigenous knowledge or materials, including recent updates which explore and define notions of Indigenous Knowledge in the digital world¹². While many of the specifics of these protocol documents are yet to be formally adopted at the State Library, they provide a clear roadmap for creating engaging and inclusive library services and collections.

The State Library of Western Australia has a strong history of programs and outreach work with remote Indigenous communities, including the *Better Beginnings Family Literacy Program*¹³, *Walmajarri Language Stories Project*¹⁴ and involvement with the *National Partnership*

¹¹ NSLA Indigenous Working Group, web site.

¹² ATSILIRN Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services, 2012.

¹³ Better Beginnings Family Literacy Program, web site.

¹⁴ State Library of Western Australia, *From Kadjina to the World Wide Web*, 2013.

*Agreement on Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access*¹⁵. During the consultation, delivery and evaluation of these initiatives, State Library staff learned three key lessons:

- Remote Indigenous communities had little or no awareness of the State Library, its role and its collections,
- Photographic material returned on these trips was highly valued by the community and digital copies were quickly viewed and shared around by different families and individuals,
- Attitudes and protocols regarding use of deceased images and naming taboos were changing; enforcement and use of these protocols varies from person to person and community to community.

These lessons (among others) informed the State Library of Western Australia's *Reconciliation Action Plan 2010-2011*¹⁶ and directly influenced the development of the organisation's most recent *Strategic Directions*¹⁷ which outline clear strategies and an ongoing commitment to engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples and communities. This experience also contributed to the development of the National and State Libraries Australasia documents including the *National Position Statement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections*¹⁸ and *Working with Community: Guidelines for collaborative practice between libraries and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*¹⁹.

What is Storylines?

In 2010 it was recognised that a system was needed to remove the persistent barriers between Indigenous people and the State Library collections. After witnessing the *Ara Irititja*²⁰ software in use by communities in the remote Ngaanyatjarra Lands (which includes some of the most remote and isolated communities in the country²¹) the State Library of Western Australia purchased 5 software licences to undertake a pilot project using the software to reinvigorate the heritage collections, and return photographs to Indigenous communities.

The *Ara Irititja* software (which is Anangu for 'stories from a long time ago') allows knowledge of people and places to define collections of multimedia, rather than fixed subject or classification systems. It allows profiles of people, places, plants and animals to be created and curated by the community and fosters an organic approach to information and knowledge management - photographic, video, audio and documentary material can be curated according to community input and guidance, resulting in archives which are both adaptive and resilient, especially in comparison to traditional library catalogue systems²².

Using this software platform the State Library built and launched *Storylines*²³ in 2013, after spending a number of years exploring similar models and work undertaken by the Northern Territory Library Service²⁴ in the Northern part of Australia. Initial guidelines and protocols were established with the support of a new Aboriginal Reference Group and ongoing consultation with Indigenous people and organisations.

Storylines is a central online archive for Indigenous heritage material held at the State Library including oral histories, photographs, newspapers, documents, audio and video. The collections are

¹⁵ Council of Australian Governments, *Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage*, 2008.

¹⁶ State Library of Western Australia, *Reconciliation Action Plan 2010-2011*.

¹⁷ State Library of Western Australia, *Strategic Directions 2013-2017*.

¹⁸ NSLA, *National Position Statement*, 2014.

¹⁹ NSLA, *Working with Community*, 2013.

²⁰ Ara Irititja, web site.

²¹ Roberts, A., 2006.

²² Ara Irititja, web site.

²³ Storylines, web site.

²⁴ Northern Territory Library, *Community Stories*, 2015.

organised by people and places, indexed by knowledge profiles which link items across traditional collection and subject areas.

Instead of searching across different collections in the State Library building, clients can now search one central archive, with results drawn from multiple collection areas, eras and subjects. Each item in *Storylines* can be curated by the community in the form of text comments and audio/video annotations, and registered users can create their own private albums.

The *Storylines* project is also supporting remote communities in the construction and maintenance of local digital archives. Using the same *Ara Irititja* software the State Library has built two local keeping places to date in partnership with local knowledge and language holders.

Wurnan Storylines: A custom built digital keeping place built at Mowanjum Aboriginal Community to house local materials relating to the Worrora, Ngarinyin and Wunumbal culture, languages and history. Built in 2014 and currently available only to community members, *Wurnan Storylines* is managed according to local protocols and requirements. It is named after *wurnan* which is an ancient system of trade and exchange²⁵ in the Kimberley.

Mangara Storylines: A custom built digital keeping place built to house local materials relating to the Yawuru people - traditional owners of the Broome area. This system was built in 2015 and named after the Yawuru word for *everything*.

These two community controlled archives are run by local cultural authorities independently of the State Library *Storylines* system. Any material which is identified in the State Library collections as secret, sacred or sensitive can be returned to the relevant cultural or language group via their local keeping place, while other material remains accessible to the wider population. Communities which are not yet in a position to build and run a local keeping place will still have access to the central *Storylines* archive.

How is Storylines breaking down barriers:

The *Storylines* archive(s) exist as fully online digital keeping places. The *Ara Irititja* software runs from a cloud server and can be accessed on any desktop or laptop computer with internet access, which means the material in the archive to be accessed from anywhere in the world and at any time. This goes a long way towards mitigating many of the issues which make Indigenous engagement with library services so problematic.

Online delivery completely removes physical access barriers and allows material from the State Library collections to be present in people's homes, workplaces, schools and offices. People living in remote areas are no longer disadvantaged by the sheer distances involved in visiting and accessing material which reflects their culture, family and history. Historical user statistics for *Storylines* indicate that an average of 200²⁶ people visit the archive each month to search for material. This number has increased by more than 500% in recent months due to continued engagement with the community and media outlets^{27 28 29 30}, which confirms that there is a strong desire for access to appropriately curated and inclusive Indigenous heritage material³¹. The importance of projects like *Storylines* has been noted, in particular the community-centred approach to curation and engagement which has the potential to become the "benchmark for other archival institutions across Australia"³².

²⁵ Redmond, A., 2012.

²⁶ Internal *Storylines* statistics, May 2015.

²⁷ Bickers, 2015.

²⁸ Bickers, 2015.

²⁹ Parke, 2015.

³⁰ ABC News, *Storylines Project – Yawuru*.

³¹ Demonstrated by 2,429 likes as of 18/05/2015 on ABC News Facebook post.

³² Oxenham, 2014 (p221).

The process of adding heritage material to *Storylines* provides State Library staff with a unique and timely opportunity to research items. Many items in the collection have not been updated or researched from an Indigenous perspective and significant value is added to collections by connecting them with the community. This is undertaken with the expressed desire to return the images to families and uncover the stories behind them, which has to date assisted in the identification of hundreds of previously unknown photographs.

This information is regularly fed back into the State Library catalogue, changing photos with captions like “*Group portrait, Derby*” to “*The Ryder family and Billy Buntin, crocodile hunters in the Kimberley.*”³³ Thanks to work with elders in and around Derby the names of every person in this photograph are now known, along with additional genealogical and biographical information (*figure 3*).



Figure 3: Photograph of the Ryder family near Derby in 1948. The *Storylines* project has now identified every person in this photograph in consultation with the community. (SLWA BA575/778)

Hundreds of annotations have been left by community members from around the state who have accessed *Storylines* to share memories, stories and corrections.

Snapshots: Storylines at Work

Wajarri Elders:

Wajarri knowledge holders Brendan and Liam Hamlett visited the State Library in October 2013 to explore Wajarri heritage resources that are held in the library collections. Brendan and Liam spoke of a photo that existed in the Wajarri oral tradition, but had not been seen for many years.



Figure 4: Wajarri men and women near the Weld Ranges, in the 1890s. Central figure is Nyoolurngoo. (SLWA BA888/8)

According to the Hamletts, the last protectors of the waterholes in the Weld Range were photographed together many years ago. The story has been passed down from generation to generation; a memory of these last knowledge holders who gathered before many Wajarri people were forced from their traditional lands.

The picture in question (*figure 6*) is part of the Library collection and it was uncovered and re-catalogued³⁴ with the new information provided by the Hamletts. The photograph had been in the State Library collections for a number of decades, and had not been identified since it was taken in the 1890s – more than 120 years ago. Based on oral tradition, cultural markers (the nose-bone and pearl shell necklace) and recent research, the Hamletts were able to identify the central figure as Nyoolurngoo, a Wajarri elder and Law man from the late 19th century.

Once this connection had been made, the *Storylines* project team were able to connect the photograph to another image from an early Western Australian newspaper³⁵ – a photograph of Booreeangoo, Nyoolurngoo’s mother.

Engaging the community through media:

³³ State Library of Western Australia, BA575/777.

³⁴ State Library of Western Australia, BA888/8.

³⁵ The Western Mail, *The Death of Booreeangoo*, 1909.

The State Library has recently worked with a number of media organisations to promote the project, and to encourage the community to engage with the material in the archive. In 2014/15 the *Storylines* project was featured in a number of national, local and community media stories including print, television, radio and online. These stories highlighted the histories and human stories that have been uncovered by the project, and have had very positive outcomes for the State Library and the *Storylines* project.

Some highlights from recent media engagement are:

- Following the publication of a number of unidentified photographs in the West Australian newspaper³⁶, May Lorna O'Brien recognised herself in the photos and contacted the State Library to share her story. May later spent a number of hours at the State Library, assisting the *Storylines* project team in the identification of dozens of other photographs from Mount Margaret.
- A photograph of Pearl Ashwin (one of the first Aboriginal nurses in Meekatharra during the 1950s) was used in a set of promotional postcards. Pearl came across one of these postcards in Port Hedland (*figure 7*) and her daughter made contact with the State Library³⁷. Pearl and her daughter Miriam both expressed joy at the knowledge that Pearl's story would forever be attached to these photographs, available for generations to come.



Figure 5: Pearl Baumgarten (nee Ashwin) in 2015, after rediscovering this photograph of herself at only 17

Evaluation and measuring impact:

The *Storylines* project has the potential to revolutionise the way that the State Library engages Indigenous knowledge holders and families, and has already had a profound impact on the State Library's heritage collections. An external evaluation of the *Wurnan Storylines* archive in Mowanjum is currently underway, and is being conducted by Dr Inge Kral from the Australian National University. Dr Kral's extensive experience working with remote communities to explore notions of literacy, technology and history will greatly inform the evaluation and provide key insights to further develop the project.

As a result of this project the State Library is approaching Aboriginal heritage collections with less uncertainty, instead opening up collections to the community in an effort to learn as much as possible before it is too late. There is still a considerable life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia³⁸, and this means that elders, storytellers, knowledge holders and language speakers are dying before they have the chance to record or share their knowledge. Projects like *Storylines* are ensuring that there is a mechanism to record and share these memories, creating opportunities for people to reaffirm their history, tell their story and determine their future.

The *Storylines* project represents an exciting new direction for the State Library of Western Australia. It is the largest-scale return of material the State Library has ever undertaken, and is part of continued efforts to return photographs to Indigenous families and ensure that the heritage collections are inclusive and accessible. The importance of this material to families is impossible to overstate. *Storylines* may not be able to undo the damage done by (and to) past generations, but it is assisting people by connecting them to family, history and culture. This connection to the past can support the processes of healing and cultural revitalisation already occurring in Indigenous communities and families throughout the state.

³⁶ Bickers, 2015.

³⁷ Macpherson, C. 2015. *Memory House goes State-wide*.

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