

Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art

edited by Darren Jorgensen and Ian Mclean

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An archive is a Western concept – a construction of state institutions to maintain public documents and official records for both posterity and historical significance. Archives are not neutral and are rarely complete and as such are typically fragmented and partial. An Indigenous archive, however it may be defined, sits within these frameworks. How they are positioned, how they are used, and how they are constructed, is the focus of this new volume of essays edited by Darren Jorgensen and Ian McLean. In *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, contributors describe how the concept of an Indigenous archive fits into, challenges, redefines or completely ignores the paradigm of the Western archive. This volume is a timely contribution, critically engaging the reader with Indigenous archives across Australia with beautifully written case studies and stories showing the innovation and diversity of its subject matter. It is not a perfect volume though, and its unfortunate flaws detract from what could otherwise be a stellar publication.

The structure of the 18 essays is separated out into four parts: ‘Limits to Archives’, ‘Histories from Archives’, ‘Indigenising Archives’ and ‘Decolonising Archives’. Framing these four parts for the reader and providing a critical context is left to the volume’s short preface, which is forced to give a superficial treatment. The preface lays out for example ‘the importance of the archivist’ as ‘the interpreter and organiser of The Archive’ (p. xi). Reading these statements in the context of a volume on *Indigenous* archives is awkward. Lacking self-reflexivity on *who* the archivist is and how the identity of the archivist might be a critical factor in the *interpretation* and organisation of materials relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a serious oversight. Emphasising the importance of the archivist does not do the

authors contributing to this volume justice as none of them claim that kind of authority. The introduction, instead of giving these kinds of issues some real weight and time, waxes rhapsodic around Derrida's concept of the archon, which, for the purposes of this volume, borders on the bizarre.

The introduction aside, there are several stand-out chapters that illustrate how Indigenous archives hold a unique position within the Aboriginal art industry and the lives of Aboriginal artists. Emilia Galatis's chapter on Ngaanyatjarra history paintings provides a sensitively written account, bringing in the theory of cultural trauma into discussions about archives. John Kean's article on Johnny Warangula Tjupurrula is backed by 138 footnotes, which makes Kean's contribution a source in and of itself. Philippa Jahn brings in the rock art record as a form of environmental archive, and Brook Andrew and Katarina Matiasek's chapter is commendable for its innovation in writing of an archival travelogue. Jane Lydon's chapter is a well-examined case study of how Aboriginal engagement can transform photographic archives.

There are three articles that are exemplars for incorporating Aboriginal voices, Aboriginal authorship and for demonstrating ways in which an Indigenous archive challenges Western concepts. John Dallwitz, Janet Inyika, Susan Lowish and Linda Rive produced a brilliant chapter on the Aṛa Irititja project, a database of historical and artistic documentation driven by Aṇangu wishes for a 'regularly updated, high quality interactive multi-media' interface that includes Indigenous languages (p. 250). Genevieve Grieves and Odette Kelada provide the only examples of the connections 'between activism, art and archives' by exploring the works of Vernon Ah Kee and Yhonnie Scarce (p. 324). Finally, Robert Lazarus Lane's article investigates the agency of Yolngu artist Wukun Wanambi and how the archive at the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka centre in Yirrkala plays a role in cultural ceremony. As Lane writes, 'any choreography that appears to originate fully from the dancer, and not from the archive, is not ceremonial because it's outside the archival process' (p. 228). These three chapters turn the Western archive concept on its head and reform it in ways that are specifically Aboriginal.

Despite these many successful aspects of *Indigenous Archives*, there are some issues that could have been approached more critically, making this volume more accountable to the promise in its title. Of the 22 contributing authors, only four identify as Aboriginal Australians. Considering the high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers engaging with archives, libraries, museum collections and art centres across the country, having only four First Nation authors in the volume is a low number. Curiously, several authors cite and reference Julie Gough's archival research but Gough herself is not a contributing author, which seems like a lost opportunity.

One final point I would like to make is a personal issue I have with edited works considering Australian 'Indigenous art' or archives. The term is misleading in this case as the book does not include one single case study or author from the Torres Strait. Often in discussions about Indigenous issues in Australia, Torres Strait Islanders struggle for visibility. In a volume about Indigenous archives, this oversight seems particularly devastating as Islanders have been active engagers with their archives in museums, libraries and galleries for decades (see anything written by Anita Herle, for example). Australian academics need to start remembering the country's other First Nation peoples in the development of their publications.

The bottom line is that this volume is a wonderful contribution to our understanding of Aboriginal archives in Australia and the many ways in which it is being transformed and utilised by communities, academics and artists. It is recommended for its diverse case studies but cautioned against for its missing pieces (maybe rectified in volume two?).

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