

## ***Archival Returns: Central Australia and Beyond***

edited by Linda Barwick, Jennifer Green  
and Petronella Vaarzon-Morel

xxviii + 345 pp., illustrated, University of Hawai'i Press  
with Sydney University Press, 2020,  
ISBN: 9781743326725 (pbk), \$45.00<sup>1</sup>

Review by Mariko Smith  
Australian Museum and University of Sydney

‘Place-based cultural learning – of ceremonies, songs, stories, language, kinship and ecology – binds Australian Indigenous societies together’, as described on this book’s back cover and the editors’ preface (p. xiii), neatly signposts the overarching focus of the 16 essays contained in *Archival Returns: Central Australia and Beyond*. Although the experience of having cultural learning recorded by outsiders, taken and archived away from Country is shared by many First Nations across the continent now called ‘Australia’, the attention of editors Linda Barwick, Jennifer Green and Petronella Vaarzon-Morel is firmly drawn to Central Australia – arguably the heart of ‘Aboriginal Australia’ in the minds of many a collector, researcher, curator and member of the public during the last two and a half centuries of European occupation. Aboriginal cultural collections and archives tend to feature strong representation from the region, reflecting historical collecting and researching trends that have been influential in defining what ‘Aboriginal’ means in Australia and invoking the ‘traditional’ versus ‘contemporary’ binary of authenticity around Aboriginality through comparisons of the early contact east coast with the seemingly more ‘untouched’ centre.

As outlined in their preface (p. xiv), the editors explained how the scope in *Archival Returns* initially focused on the Central Land Council (CLC) area (see Chapters 2–9) that covers almost 777,000 square kilometres in the southern half of the Northern Territory, as detailed on the CLC’s website.<sup>2</sup> However, they subsequently expanded

---

<sup>1</sup> Also available in open access through the journal *Language Documentation & Conservation*.

<sup>2</sup> Central Land Council, ‘Where We Are’, accessed 31 August 2020, [www.clc.org.au/articles/info/where-we-are](http://www.clc.org.au/articles/info/where-we-are).

beyond this specific region to the Daly River region (Chapter 10) to the north, still in the Northern Territory, then westward over the Western Australian state border to parts of the Western Desert (Chapters 11–15), and further extended down to the south-west of Western Australia into Noongar Country (Chapter 16). A handy map (p. xiv) shows the places and language groups featured in the book, with helpful cross-referencing of relevant chapters.

The ‘Beyond’ of the book’s title is evidently referring to these other regions in the Northern Territory and Western Australia that are geographically beyond Central Australia itself. As a Koori from the south-eastern coastal region, living in early contact, highly colonised and urbanised Sydney in New South Wales, who works at a museum that holds cultural material from First Nations across the country, I interpreted ‘Beyond’ across sociohistorical and cultural contexts as well. I keenly reviewed this book with a view to ascertain its appeal and value for those of us beyond the central, northern and western parts of this vast country who may be able to learn from the experiences and observations of the contributing authors – whether we work in GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) institutions located outside of Central Australia and surrounding regions with Arrernte, Western Aranda, Anmatyerr, Warlpiri, Warumungu, Kaytetye, Gurindji, Daly language region (including Matngele), Pintupi, NPY (Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, and Yankunytjatjara) and Wirlomin Noongar communities, cultural collections and archival materials; or with other Aboriginal communities from elsewhere who are also trying to access, manage, maintain, reclaim and repatriate their own cultural heritage on their own terms and cultural protocols.

This volume involved 35 contributing authors, most of whom are non-Indigenous, with only eight identifying as Aboriginal. Reading through the contributors’ impressive biographies, there appears to be an abundance of non-Indigenous linguists, anthropologists, musicologists and researchers. I appreciate that each of the non-Indigenous editors and contributing authors has an admirable track record of working with and for Aboriginal communities, often over many years, with a number working directly for Indigenous organisations. However, it is still a reflection of a familiar trend of First Nations being researched predominantly by non-Indigenous experts (reminding me of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s observations, particularly in the introductory chapter to her seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*).<sup>3</sup> As Nimi’ipuu (Nez Perce) American Indian scholar Dr Gretchen Stolte noted in her review of *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art* in 2018, which also had a low number of First Nations authors compared to non-Indigenous ones, there is a ‘high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers engaging with archives, libraries,

---

3 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 30–55.

museum collections and art centres across the country’, and I would emphasise that editors of publications involving Indigenous communities and subject matters should privilege First Nations writers as much as possible.<sup>4</sup>

The editors include a foreword written by Aboriginal man David Ross AM from the CLC and note in their preface that ‘[i]t is significant that several of the chapters in the volume are written by Indigenous people who are multiply engaged as both contributors to, and end users of, archives’ (p. xiii). However, this accounts for just over one-third of the total number of chapters – six out of 16 – featuring at least one Indigenous author. Stand-out chapters in positioning Indigenous authorities front-and-centre include Chapter 2, presented almost entirely in a flowing interview transcript style between co-authors Kungarakana and Arrernte man Shaun Penangke Angeles and Arrernte man Joel Perrurle Liddle, facilitated by non-Indigenous Research Fellow Jason Gibson. As a form of yarning-as-research, this chapter presents an alternative form of writing beyond the traditional academic article, with the capacity to gather information through a narrative/storytelling structure that also develops rapport and relationship-building between the participants.<sup>5</sup> Other notable examples are Gurindji/Malngin/Mudburra artist and academic Brenda L. Croft’s first-person narrated contributions in Chapter 9; and Noongar academics and practitioners Clint Bracknell and Kim Scott’s providing their first-hand perspectives within the context of Noongar language revival on a useful community-driven model for groups working with endangered Indigenous languages.

Overall, *Archival Returns* holds great potential for inspiring First Nations communities, researchers and cultural institution practitioners in their own community-centred initiatives and research. It illustrates various ‘strategies and practices that enable the return and circulation of documentary records of cultural heritage (in textual, audio, visual, cartographical, digital forms) back to their communities of origin’, acknowledging and describing some of the inherent complexities (p. xiii). The first chapter contains the critical unpacking of the various technical, political, social and cultural processes and issues at play, as well as the relevant legal and ethical frameworks, for when communities, organisations, researchers and institutions negotiate physical and digital returns/repatriation. This volume helpfully offers, through case studies, a number of tools that older and younger generations in Aboriginal communities can employ to protect, manage and maintain place-based cultural learning in archival materials, in accordance with proper cultural protocols in the appropriate contexts. As stated by David Ross in his foreword, ‘Cultural knowledge is learned and earned and access to digital material should be done in the proper way’ (p. xi).

4 Stolte, ‘Review of *Indigenous Archives*’, 200.

5 See Bessarab and Ng’andu, ‘Yarning about Yarning’, 37–50.

## References

- Bessarab, Dawn and Bridget Ng'Andu. 'Yarning about Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research'. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 3, no. 1 (2010): 37–50. doi.org/10.5204/ijcis.v3i1.57.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed. London: Zed Books, 2012.
- Stolte, Gretchen. 'Review of *Indigenous Archives: The Making and Unmaking of Aboriginal Art*, by Darren Jorgensen and Ian Mclean'. *Aboriginal History* 42 (2018): 200. doi.org/10.22459/AH.42.2018.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 44, 2020*, edited by Crystal McKinnon and Ben Silverstein, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.