

The Archive and the Cassowary
 Tahnee Innes
 August 2022

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is a U.S. federal law passed in 1990. It ensured that Indigenous human remains and ceremonial objects in state museums were reported to descendant communities and then, if requested, repatriated. NAGPRA therefore addresses a postcolonial critique captured in the brilliant and brutal comment of one Native American lawyer: ‘Desecrate a white grave and you get jail. Desecrate an Indian grave and you get a Ph.D’¹. No legislation like NAGPRA exists in Australia. However, the repatriation of human remains and secret-sacred objects has been advocated by Museums Australia, now AMaGA, for some time.

State museums and libraries are also interested in the repatriation of more secular things. I support this broadening of repatriation as both an anthropologist and a Yawuru native title holder. An Indigenous artefact shouldn’t have to be “sacred” to be returned to its place of origin. In the case of that other critical repository, the land council, a repatriation-of-all-things argument probably extends to the return (to PBCs) of connection reports and genealogies, since this material contains what is classified as cultural heritage or traditional knowledge under the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007*. This is still an uncertain space because land councils across Australia have different in-house policies on the return of data to “the community “produced as a result of land claims research.

Recently, it seems the definition of repatriation has expanded even further – to mean the *control of access* to similarly secular and tangible research products. Repatriation, in other words, has come to emphasise *people over place*. At the risk of stating the obvious, this is not what repatriation is about. Of course, it’s natural to think of repatriation as “a return to the people” when the context involves Indigenous people, who are, by definition, linked to place. But there are still real problems with this apparent no-brainer next step towards decolonising the archives. Research obviously must be repatriated to the right people. And what I’ve learned from my current foray into native title anthropology is that “right place” is, in many ways, a lot less complicated than “right people”.

Before working in native title, I researched Indigenous Curatorship in North Queensland. This was far from my own home in Broome.

On one occasion I was part of a conversation with Ernie Grant, a Jirrbal elder and curator of rainforest artefacts, and his nephew in Tully. We were discussing what kind of helpful resource should be created for a Dyrbal language project. Ernie said: “I would like information to be made available, and brought all together, like a scrub hen nest”. In this way, the resource he had in mind was itself a collection. An archive. It included the maps, books, tapes, photographs, PhD theses, and manuscripts that he had collected and contributed to during his 80-year lifetime.

¹ Simpson, M. G. (1996). "The repatriation debate: an international issue" In *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (pp. pp.215-245). London: Routledge, p. 173

Ernie went on to say that when we gather eggs in the nest they can hatch, “like ideas”. At this, I offered: “there are a few nests around – like the one at (a local organisation)”. “Yes”, Ernie replied, “but they have a big cassowary watching over it that won’t let you near it!”. I didn’t ask him directly who, or what, the cassowary was. But my guess was that it stood for the organisational bureaucracy, and certain individuals long-known to him, all acting as a barrier to accessing stuff once it was stored there.

The question still before us is this: who or what will be the next cassowary of Indigenous archives? I believe if we must have a cassowary at all, then it should be a black cassowary. But – am I happy that the cassowary might be someone from another family whom my own family has mistrusted for generations? No. (As my grandmother would say, certain families were “proper troublemakers”. Yet to them, my family were probably the troublemakers.)

My point is that with efforts to reconceptualise repatriation in terms of returning not only tangible things to places, but also control of access to people, we can’t be naïve to the fact that, just as museums have politics, people have politics. “People” become “certain people” even in the Indigenous community.

So, when I asked Ernie Grant where he would like his archive and artefacts “in 50 years’ time” he replied, “I would like to see them in the best possible public domain and the best possible keeping situation that includes preservation techniques. But also publicly available”.

I too agree that the archive nest has to be cared for by someone with preservation skills. It has to be accessible, so ideas can hatch. Moreover, we don’t need a cassowary just because we are wary, as Indigenous people, of the white researcher.

What we do need are trained Indigenous curators, caretakers, preferably from “somewhere else”, to facilitate access for *all* researchers and to encourage *all* members of Indigenous communities to engage with and add to the nest. The focus then is on caring not scaring. This approach might even help to depoliticise Indigenous collections and archives, which is surely a good thing. (WC=869)