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BOOK REVIEWS

AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND LIBRARIES

Martin Nakata & Marcia Langton (Eds.)
Australian Academic and Research Libraries, Canberra,
2005, vi+216pp, ISBN 0 86804 563 2

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In her 1992 study of the Yarralin people of the Victoria River district of Australia's Northern Territory, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (1992, p. 226) noted that "Knowing develops over time, and in more important issues, depends on information which is dispersed through time and space". She was specifically addressing Yarralin epistemologies here, but the statement could just as easily be applied to Western traditions of knowing. Libraries, those "lasting mansions of the dead", as the English poet George Crabbe called them in 1781, have commonly been amongst the most significant agents of that dispersal of knowledge "through time and space". They are "mediators", Nakata and Langton note in their introduction to the volume reviewed here, occupying "an intermediate space between those who produce and are the legal owners of knowledge and those who require access to knowledge" (p. 5). This text explores the social, political, legal and information professional spaces where Western and Indigenous knowledge systems have come into contact. It presents 16 papers delivered at the Libraries and Indigenous Knowledge Colloquium held in December 2004 and hosted jointly by the State Library of New South Wales and Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology Sydney. These chapters are book-ended by a stimulating introduction by academics Martin Nakata and Marcia Langton and a thoughtful postscript from President of the International Federation of Library Associations, Alex Byrne.

Nakata et al. remind us that the documentation of traditional cultural knowledge has taken place historically through the work of anthropologists and missionaries (p. 13). Indeed Indigenous Australian people are amongst the most studied in the world. The process of colonisation, violent as it so often was, has also brought Indigenous people, almost from

the first instance, under the studied gaze of Western science and Anglo-European administration – "poked, prodded, measured, tested and compared" as Rigney (1999, p. 109) points out, by "explorers, medical practitioners, intellectuals, travellers and voyeurs who observed from a distance". Libraries, museums and archives have typically been the storehouses of the product of that endeavour, assembled largely for and by, non-Indigenous Australians. Alex Byrne reminds us that the development of the methodologies of these institutions coincides with the expansion of European colonialism. The habitable world became subjected to the political control of the colonisers and hence to "their languages, laws, religions and customs – their knowledge systems" (p. 213). There in the libraries and archives too one finds the record of the colonisation process. Frequently though there are telling silences on the more bloody aspects of that process and on the iniquities of the stolen generations and stolen wages experiences. Through the embedded cultural assumptions of these collecting institutions, with the tools of their trade such as the Dewey Decimal Classification and Library of Congress Subject Headings, they have also acted as agents in the colonising process by marginalising Indigenous groups and their ways of knowing. We now wrestle with the legacies of the process whereby Indigenous knowledge came to enter, and in some cases become incarcerated in, a world of controlled vocabularies and authorities subjugated to the regimen of a catalogue card and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the online database.

In recent times there have been a number of publications produced to guide library, information science and museum professionals in their responsibilities towards Indigenous users and towards Indigenous material in their collections (e.g., Byrne et al., 1995; Baillie, 1998; IFLA, 2002; Dolan, 2005; Hudson, 2006). Alana Garwood-Houng's chapter in this text reflects on the origins, development and future of the first of these, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries Archives and Information Services (Byrne et al., 1995). While such policies, guidelines and protocols are welcome, and clear and high standards of practice are desirable goals, Nakata and Langton point out in their introduction to the volume that there is "no quick fix, no easy prescription to address the issues" (p. 5). These authors seek "an unsettling of established practice, and the questioning of some of the assumptions on

which established practice rests" (p. 3). Perhaps the emergence of new guidelines and protocols is evidence of the beginning of that process. Jane Anderson (2005) elsewhere has noted the need for reimagining a new relationship between libraries and Indigenous people and translating that into practice. Nakata and Langton call for the development of "a set of practices that recognise the entanglement of the two traditions [Western and Indigenous] as they move forward in a somewhat problematic tension" (p. 4).

How might libraries and archives resolve issues of access to sacred or secret knowledge based on gender or initiate status? How might intellectual property laws take account of communal ownership of knowledge? New technologies raise new questions about access, ownership and reproduction. This volume makes no pretence at simple formulaic solutions to these and other issues. Rather it seeks to highlight the complexities of this world for professionals acting in the information sciences and to lay a path for understanding of, and respect for, Indigenous perspectives. These values must guide future dialogue surrounding the needs of Indigenous people and their knowledge within our libraries and archives. Collecting institutions need to be diligent in their preservation of fragile visual and audio cultural material. At the same time they need to build trusting relationships with Indigenous communities and to be guided by them in their decision-making on how this material is maintained, accessed and, where appropriate, repatriated.

That dialogue, as represented in this text, offers a "broad church" approach to emerging trends in Indigenous knowledge issues. It ranges over a wide area of professional practice, bringing together the work of library and information science professionals, educators, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and legal practitioners, nine of whom are Indigenous. It addresses issues such as the identification and repatriation of material to relevant communities and determining culturally appropriate access and service delivery models to such materials. Specifically it includes three chapters from library workers describing the successes and otherwise of existing Indigenous Knowledge Centres in the Northern Territory and Queensland. Chapters by academics Marcia Langton and Zane Ma Rhea and one by Arun Agrawal offer more theoretical and analytical perspectives on the issues. The former analyses initiatives and imperatives in traditional Indigenous biodiversity use, while Agrawal's chapter theorises on "how ideas about power can be reconceptualised in discussions of indigeneity" (p. 74). Jane Anderson's chapter engagingly weaves theories about intellectual property and the reconceptualisation of the role of colonial libraries and archives as "epistemological experiments" (p. 91) with a discussion of her own work within Indigenous Knowledge Centres in the Northern Territory. Included too are discussions of the role of

information technologies in Indigenous knowledge management (Hunter); legal and ethical discussions relating to intellectual and cultural property rights along with suggestions for future policy development (Janke); and an account which addresses these issues within the broader context of World Trade Agreement and the *General Agreement on Trade in Services* (Davis).

Despite the use of the word "library" in the title there are also four chapters which specifically address Indigenous issues and archives. Some papers are delivered by researchers and library users. Others emerge from the day-to-day work of librarians, library managers and archivists. Not surprisingly the end product is something of a curate's egg. One wonders in some cases whether the nuances of what might have been an engaging and lively presentation at a conference, may not translate so well to the written page. Sometimes too the diverse nature of individual writing styles in these chapters challenges the sensibilities of the reader. Such caveats are minor however, and this volume offers much for an audience of readers broader than the professional library community. Nor should Australians feel that they are lagging behind the rest of the world on these issues. There is evidence to suggest that the kinds of initiatives promoted in this volume have predated equivalent undertakings with First Nations people in North America (Underhill, 2006, p. 531).

The substance of this book is not confined to library corridors or the halls of academe. Nakata et al. point out that "at the heart of this intersection are people" (p. 22). For many, the issues here are "heart" issues which bear on basic human rights and the way that lives are lived and cultures and memories respected. In May of 2007 *The Australian* newspaper reported the Australian Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough's comments in relation to English language use in remote communities: "Most of the children in many communities don't speak any semblance of English" Mr Brough said, "so what chance have they got?" "They speak the language that only a handful of people do" (Karvelas & Megalogenis, 2007). While one can hardly refute the advantages of learning English, as Brough points out, his statements place little value on traditional languages. There is no indication in the reportage that its retention is valued by policy-makers. Traditional ways are seen as an impediment to "progress". The Prime Minister John Howard weighed in with his comments: "Indigenous people have no hope of being part of the mainstream of this country unless they can speak the language of this country." Bicultural identity and the value of language maintenance are subsumed into mono-cultural ways of knowing. How can Indigenous Australians know who they are and where they are going without the knowledge of where they have been? Indigenous knowledge, as Alex Byrne points out in the "Afterword" of this text,

has a coherence and orthodoxy which must be maintained to preserve its integrity and passed on to provide meaning for future generations. But is not static or frozen, nor 'carbon-dated', it is alive and in responsive dialogue with vibrant cultural life (p. 211).

This book assists librarians, archivists and informational professionals to right some of the wrongs of cultural disruption wrought by colonisation. It helps us on a path to reconnecting Indigenous Australians with a past that memory may have been only partially retained. It serves too to promote respectful treatment of Indigenous culture within our society at large while emphasising the necessity for engagement and consultation with that culture.

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SIN-E-ANNE

Cindy Ballard & Samantha Laden

Self-Published by Samantha Laden, Perth, n.d., 80pp [eBook, CD-Rom with print text and sound recording, and multi-media elements]

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Sin-E-Anne is an oral narrative of Placida Cynthia Ballard, a Yamitji woman, written down by her friend and mentor, Samantha Laden. It is a story of survival of a mission experience and of successful escape from New Norcia, and it writes back to such narratives as the tragic tale of Doris Pilkington's mother, which was the basis for the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. New Norcia was not, it seems, the hell-hole that Moore River was, but it was certainly a place where children endured much hardship and suffered the loss of family. Punishments were milder, but still traumatic for the child – a rough and punitive haircut for attempting to run away; enclosure in a vermin-infected cupboard for up to an hour for lesser offences (stealing figs). So out of proportion was the punishment that it erased the memory of what provoked it, and so was totally ineffective as a deterrent. The work was tough and the Spanish nuns sometimes tyrannical – mountains of washing for hundreds of children, if you were a girl, or worked in the kitchen – and the narrative makes clear that the state and the church got a cheap labour force out of such establishments. She does, however, remember with pleasure the duties of the chookpen and the excitement of holyday feasts of roast chicken as a wonderful break from the more normal fare of sheep's head soup, complete with eyes, or weevily weeties.

The form of this memoir is quite original: the print version can be downloaded if you wish, but it is a searchable archive populated with lots of images and some short video clips. I'm told that there is a way of hearing the narrative, though I could not make this work. Assuming it does work, that is a useful device for secondary school-age students who may be print-averse, or having reading difficulties as the combination of sound and print may be a useful one for teaching them how to correlate sound and print. The narrative is written in a style fairly close to the vernacular, but a tad more formal.

The narrative waxes and wanes in its intensity. The parts which I found most interesting and which may be usefully extracted for classroom use are:

- The childhood idyll of Sin-E-Anne (Pacida Cynthia's pet-name generated by pronunciation difficulties with "th"), is located in the pre-mission days when