

Information Futures, Virtual Repatriation and Knowledge Transfer

The University of Melbourne's cultural collections comprise 33 principal collections, comprising several million individual items. Within these collections are vast amounts of material of immense value to researchers, scholars and senior community representatives. In collecting and retaining this material, which includes photographs, texts and objects, the University has been part of an acquisition chain that has removed the material from communities and individuals for whom it has particular and important meaning.

These communities and individuals often hold knowledge about the item that, for a number of reasons, is simply not available through usual scholarly programs. The University is not in a position to properly understand this material if it cannot engage with knowledge holders across other cultures. The acquisition of this material, without commensurate strategies and programs to engage with those to whom this material is important, creates a paradigm that could be described as 'anti' knowledge transfer. This results from the decontextualisation and loss of relationships that enable such objects to be identified, interpreted and re-assessed within traditional and cultural frames of reference. Virtual repatriation provides a means of engaging with senior knowledge holders from other cultures and communities who would not otherwise be enabled to engage with the University or its collections.

The University has supported a number of specific knowledge transfer programs that relate to Indigenous objects in the collection, in the main through the agency of Prof. Marcia Langton and in relation to Yolngu material. The establishment of the Liya-Naarra'mirri Visiting Fellowship, and the work undertaken by Mr. Joe Neparrnga Gumbula, supported with funds from Prof. Langton's Neville Bonner Indigenous Teaching Award and the Chancellor, was the most sustained of these programs. Such programs however involve extraordinary imposts on Indigenous communities and individuals who wish to reengage with their cultural material, particularly in terms of time, travel and distance. In turn there is a large commitment of time and money required from the University.

The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation and Information Services recently hosted a seminar on the Middle Eastern Manuscript Collection. As part of this program one Persian manuscript has been digitized as a 3-D rotational image with each page available for viewing on the University's website. This will enable international access to this text and engage scholars in non-English speaking countries. Such a program, as a one-off, is of limited effectiveness; and is expensive.

Further work could be done to support real-time communication between remote communities and the University that would support conversations, teaching and research about particular items or cultural contexts. Intangible material such as sound recordings can be incorporated into such programs.

A program of virtual access and repatriation will require substantial investment in a variety of intellectual and structural platforms. This program does however link into the broader initiatives and vision of Information Futures at the University of Melbourne. Those involved with the Commission will know best about current work in this area. The work of Prof. Martin Nakata, Prof. Jane Hunter, and the University's own PARADISEC project are worth consideration, and the work of the University of Texas and the Smithsonian also provides a good model.



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