

BRAVERMAN PRIZE

JUST THROW IT ALL AWAY! (and other thoughts I have had that may bar me from a career in archiving)

by Miriam Rigby

Culture is dynamic, and the division between traditional and non-traditional [is] actually a reflection of the collector's nostalgia... One commenter has called the idea of tradition, in its most politically charged form, the "sacred weapon" of oppressors... Cultural preservation that has focused on the idea of a "traditional" way of life and traditional artifacts develops a corresponding problematic concern for "authenticity." (Welsh 843)

Sound archives of once-colonized people's materials serve an important role in preserving rare recordings for use in the future. The items kept in them may be valuable for academic studies of languages or cultural forms that have been lost or are changing. They may also be used by the people recorded; accessed out of personal interest or for study and reference on old or forgotten knowledge. Despite the clear value of keeping and preserving recordings for the future, the archivist is faced with an ethical dilemma in regards to rights. Since the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990, and through similarly themed movements around the world, projects to repatriate items have become a common practice for museums and archives.

With current digitalization technologies, repatriating sound recordings can be a simple transfer of data, and the archivist may be left with original items to continue preserving. However, before any manifestation of a recording can be returned, rights must be established – potentially a difficult process if detailed documentation for the recordings does not exist. Further, in recognizing the owners of items, archivists open themselves up to requests not just for the content of recordings, but for the originals, or even for the destruction of all copies. It is my belief that the ethical archivist must be willing to seriously consider such requests, and to fulfill them if possible,

provided that the request comes from someone with establishable rights¹. Nothing is permanent in the long run, and some recordings have the potential to cause undue suffering – items may contain sensitive information, or there may be cultural restrictions on the content of the recordings. Far from shying away from losing items, archivists should embrace their role as both a keeper and a rider of recordings. In doing so, archivists are more likely to gain the trust and friendship of those whose recordings they hold, thereby gaining more control² over the items they keep and losing relatively few. There are many cases of collaborative relationships between archivists, collectors and recorded people – especially First Nations and Australian Aboriginal peoples. Through a few example cases I will illustrate these assertions.

Before much can be done with a recording, it is crucial to establish what it is of, who is recorded, and any restrictions on it. Ideally, a collector would note these details and give them to archivists along with providing the archivist with contact information for all of the people with potential rights claims. In reality though, the extent to which documentation exists varies considerably. As well, in many cases the circumstances under which a recording was made are less than desirable. For instance, an unscrupulous collector may have pressured people into recording by. Collaborating with the people recorded, or their representatives, can inform the people about what exists and provide them with access to valuable resources while establishing these details for the archivist's purposes. One stellar case of collaboration between archivists, collectors and recorded peoples is from Australia (Christen 2006). Taking advantage of growing movements of museums repatriating items to Aboriginal peoples, two Pitjantjatjara elders, Peter Nyangu and Colin Tjapiya, worked with an anthropologist, Ushma Scales, in a major project to reclaim objects belonging to Aboriginal communities. They collaborated with the South Australia Museum to find and retrieve items and then make them accessible to the appropriate area groups via a large digitization project (Christen).

One of the factors working on the side of the Pitjantjatjara Council's "Return of Significant Cultural Property" project (Christen 56), was that they were working towards gaining access to materials more than gaining the materials themselves. In recognizing the value of the cultural property they wished to have returned, the Pitjantjatjara Council also recognized the significant value of the archiving and preservation that the South Australia Museum (SAM) could provide, and the perceived value of the artifacts as part of all Australian's cultural heritage. The communities to which they desired to repatriate items were in remote desert locations in which it would be impractical to try to house and preserve original recordings and photographs. "...instead of a physical repatriation of **some** objects, what Anangu³ wanted was a more extensive community archive that would be easily accessible, culturally appropriate and transportable." (Christen 56-57). The Pitjantjatjara Council came to the conclusion that providing access to writings, photographs, films, and sound recordings by way of a huge effort in digitizing all of these and creating an online database with

complex and multi-layered permissions and restrictions on access was the most practical solution (Christen).

This choice necessitated great effort and the invention of “niri niri”: fully enclosed pods on wheels, containing a computer, printer, data projector, satellite-internet link-up, and uninterruptible power supply that are easy to transport in trucks and which can withstand a harsh desert environment. Yet, the decision to go with a digital archive seems to have aided the project greatly. I believe that items could be repatriated without much of the controversy that surrounds some repatriation projects, due to the fact that no individual or institution had to lose access to items other than for the period of time when they were being digitized. With the eleven niri niri dispersed to remote Pitjantjatjara communities, the people now have access to a vast database of cultural materials in a manner that would be unattainable otherwise. The digital format also allows for each individual to have an easily assigned and enforced personalized level of access to edit general, “offensive,” and “dangerous” items. Primarily due to the initiative taken by the Pitjantjatjara people, and despite relatively poor funding, this project was highly successful (Christen).

This type of successful collaboration is what archivists must strive for. When it is unclear if an item is “dangerous,” offensive, or has a troubled history the potential for relaxed permissions for access can be high. Unscrupulous museums and collectors have long been known to share or display items that potentially ought not to have been. For instance, a few years ago I went to the American Museum of Natural History in New York and viewed an exhibit on “South American Peoples.” While I do not know how, by whom, or the circumstances of the collection of all of the objects displayed, I came across one troubling item in a glass case: a bullroarer, which I recognized from my anthropological studies, reading Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques*. Bullroarers are ritual items of the Bororo people, traditionally kept in the men’s hut and under no circumstances are women allowed to see them. Lévi-Strauss wrote, “Woe betide any woman who happens to see a bull-roarer; even today there is a strong possibility that she will be clubbed to death.” (230). Lévi-Strauss was only allowed to take a set after agreeing to take strong precautions to never allow women to view them (230). But here it was in full view, with not even a warning at the entrance of the exhibit to alert the potential Bororo-visitor to take caution due to the contents of the displays.

As seen with this potentially offensive exhibit and the multiple levels of access for the Pitjantjatjara’s online archives, it is important to make rights and restrictions on use clear, and then follow them. Even if recordings have few or no restrictions, a responsible archivist should take precautions to make sure that users respect rights. Yet more problematic, is the fact that there are many cases where establishing rights is near impossible. One such case is that of Ishi, the last living Yahi man. His people were systematically murdered, and in 1911, when everyone else was dead, he walked into white society. He was received remarkably well in comparison

to the rest of his people, with a linguist, Alfred Kroeber, being contacted quickly to come and communicate with him. This relationship evolved, and over the course of the rest of Ishi's life until his death of tuberculosis in 1916, Kroeber made many recordings of Yahi vocabulary and stories, both mythological and biographical. As there are no Yahi alive, it is difficult to establish can make claims on recordings and perhaps more importantly, his preserved brain kept in the Smithsonian (Kroeber 2003).

In Ishi's case there is the additional problem that we do not know anything about his intention in sharing information. Surely he wanted some human contact; he was apparently excited when Kroeber was finally able to speak words he understood after trying many languages. He gladly recounted stories, and seemed to want to share his knowledge. "For his own reasons, Ishi may have wanted to create a personal memorial to his dead family and people..." (Kroeber 260). Yet, he was also clearly distraught, under "unbelievable psychic stress" (xiv) and arguably, was therefore in no condition mentally to give permission to be recorded. While there is no one in a clear position to make the case for his recordings to be destroyed or to have severe access restrictions, his recordings and remains are in a position to be exploited, studied, and enjoyed by humankind, for as long as funding for archiving and electricity are available. As they have been published, it is also highly unlikely that they could be fully eliminated. His brain at least was repatriated in 2000 for burial to a "culturally-affiliated" Northern California tribe, the Pit-River people, who white-bureaucrats determined had the strongest cultural ties to Ishi due to linguistic similarities (121-122).

When there are people with clear rights and who hold belief systems that motivate a call for the destruction of items though, they and their requests should be respected. Barre Toelken found himself in this position in 1997, after 43 years of collecting Navajo stories (Toelken). His friend, and chief informant Hugh Yellowman had passed away and Toelken had to think about what would happen to Yellowman's recordings. In Yellowman's Navajo belief system speaking is a creative act and words have power over reality. As such, the stories he had recorded had conditions on them about the time of year they should be told – not unlike in Judaism or Christianity how certain sections of the holy books are read at certain times of the year – though there is considerably more perceived danger in relation to Yellowman's Navajo beliefs. Beyond traditional stories, talking about events could bring them into existence, and it is therefore unwise or at least, uncomfortable to discuss death. Toelken admitted that he had in fact not even thought to have asked what Yellowman's wishes were for the recordings after his death (388). A further problem with the tapes is that many Navajo, including Yellowman's family, avoid interaction with the dead (383, 385).

Upon consultation with Yellowman's widow, Helen, they determined that archiving the recordings was not an option. On the one hand, in a non-Navajo archive they were in too much danger of eventually not being

under the correct restrictions. On the other hand, Helen believed that any uniqueness they held was family business rather than tribal, and that the tribal organizations where they could potentially be deposited (The Navajo Tribal Museum and Navajo Community College) already knew the stories (385). Weighing the potential danger of the tapes and Helens wishes against his personal desires to keep a monumental record of his life's work, Toelken decided to return all of his tapes of Yellowman to Helen for destruction. This choice created much controversy, but I agree with Toelken that it was an appropriate course of action.

...letting the "target group" set the rules and the limits is not only ethically sound in a potentially hegemonic situation, but it is also eminently practical because it brings better results. (388)

Frankly, doing anything other than letting the people who have rights over objects determine what happens to those objects seems crazy; at the very least, the archivist or collector is setting herself up for bad relationships and lawsuits.

Who knows what Yellowman would have said if Toelken had thought to ask him about the future of his recordings? Toelken speculates that any agreement they would have come to would nonetheless have been trumped by Helen's concerns about the voice of a dead man (388). In that he did not ask, we are left only with speculations as well. It strikes me that perhaps Yellowman never even considered that the items would be archived given Navajo beliefs about avoiding items having to do with the dead. Or, perhaps it was not a concern for him as Yellowman may have recognized that Toelken held different beliefs and that Toelken would not be worried about a dead man's voice (while understanding the need to not play it for another Navajo).

Two clearer, brief examples of assumptions of the destruction, or deliberate avoidance of preservation, of items come from the Zuni Nation and the Tiwi Australian Aborigines. The Zuni have a ritual that involves placing twin deities in shrines, exposing them to the elements, and allowing them to decompose. Many of these images of deities were stolen from shrines however, ending up in museums and private collections. In 1987 some of these were repatriated from the National Museum of Natural History, replaced in shrines, and allowed to resume their deterioration. More have been returned and destroyed since NAGPRA passed. In this case, preserving objects went directly against cultural practices (Sercombe, Flynn).

For the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands off the northern coast of Australia, the preservation of a dead person's possessions is also a strange idea. When a person dies, all but the most distant relatives avoid everything to do with the deceased. Distant relatives carry out the burial rituals and every personal possession or item used by the deceased is buried or destroyed. The only exceptions are items that have considerable value, (either monetarily or in terms of time required to make it) such

as a house or canoe, which are smoked-out for cleansing and only used again after a waiting period. Even the name of the deceased is put out of use⁴. Photographs and recordings are therefore highly taboo items, which ought to be destroyed. Yet, there are exceptions. The main reason cited for destroying and avoidance of items of the deceased is to not be reminded of them – namely to avoid emotional pain. As well, there are differing lengths of mourning periods depending on relationship to the deceased and this also affects how ‘dangerous’ and item might be to a person (Goodale 266).

If a case similar to Yellowman’s occurred amongst the Tiwi, especially with the collector being so intertwined with the family, it is highly likely that the deceased would assume that items would be destroyed after their death. Yet, while I do not want to generalize across Australian Aboriginal peoples, there is also the Pitjantjatjara archive to consider again. They keep images and recordings of dead people, but they maintain strong restrictions on access to these, placing them in the “dangerous” category. People who will be hurt by such items do not run the risk of encountering them, yet they are kept out of a desire to keep a record of the past, and so that certain people who will not be hurt by them can study them. Perhaps a similar archiving method could have been found for the Yellowman tapes, but Toelken and Helen were too worried about restrictions being removed at some time in the future. And rightfully so, returning to the Bororo and Lévi-Strauss, there is nothing restricting a Bororo woman from walking through the National Museum of Natural History and seeing the bullroarer, despite the restrictions on that scenario that were clearly expressed by the Bororo men to Lévi-Strauss.

There are clearly many cases in which the destruction of items is not necessary. Of course, an archivist’s default should not be destruction, yet the ethical archivist must allow for that option. First and foremost, it is important to document items and establish rights and restrictions. By doing so consistently, the question of destruction should become one that is already answered; if and when an item should cease to exist will no longer be the archivist’s dilemma, or at least not as strongly so. As this is not the case, and it is likely that there will always be collectors without good notes and dead depositors who cannot tell the archivist what is what and why, the ethical archivist is left with a need to consider if and what items should be destroyed. When faced with an item that might need to be destroyed, archivists should question their motivations for keeping, and what claims the parties calling for the destruction have on the item. Cultural forms are impermanent; to keep an item based on nostalgia or a desire to ‘preserve’ a culture is to deny cultural change. Although recordings can provide people with a glimpse of how a culture or cultural form was manifested at one point in time – and this can be valuable – what argument is this against a legitimate claim of items causing unnecessary harm to people?

I believe archivists should put the maintenance and preservation of their collections first; it is their job. Yet, if someone with rights on an item calls

for its destruction, the archivist must consider this request and reach a decision of whether they are able to do so and if they will assist them achieve this goal. Much must be considered before destroying an item, but it is the ethical archivist's duty to at least consider it.

End Notes

1. Establishing who has rights over an item, or figuring out the complexities of multiple claims on an item is a difficult matter that I will not try to tackle here. Within this paper, unless otherwise stated, the assumption is that rights have been established in a relatively clear manner when I discuss what actions an archivist should take.
2. Due to having more documentation, including clearly stated permissions and restrictions, they will have greater ability to use and share items..
3. The Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people.
4. Each name a Tiwi receives (and they receive many throughout their lives) must be unique/ never previously used (Goodale 29).

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