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'You're my kwertengerl': transforming models of care for central Australian aboriginal museum collections

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ABSTRACT

This article provides ethnographic insights into the ways in which museums are being engaged with and positioned by some Aboriginal people in Central Australia. At the centre of this analysis is the stated suggestion of some Anmatyerr and Arrernte men that museums be incorporated into their social-cultural frameworks and thus brought into their systems of relating. Drawing upon endeavours to return and repatriate key central Australian collections, I reveal the complex relationship between these communities, collecting institutions and their staff. This research also highlights the agency of Anmatyerr and Arrernte people in their dealings with the ethnographer and collector, T.G.H. Strehlow, and shows how they now wish to encompass museums and other collecting institutions in a relationship founded upon complementary roles and responsibilities. Their interest in positioning the museum as a *kwertengerl*, meaning a 'manager' or 'worker' that upholds the interests of traditional owners, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the relevant institutions.

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Introduction

The relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples in Australia is often sketched in oppositional terms. These divisions are said to emanate from a persistent and perhaps inexorable antagonism between museums as instruments of colonial governance and the diverse cultural interests of ethnographic subjects (Bennett et al. 2017). The past three decades of post-colonial scholarship has produced a 'major re-evaluation' of the political as well as theoretical rubrics of the museum and its ideological foundations (Barringer and Flynn 1998, 2). Museums are now urged to alter their practices, decolonise their collections and engage with the 'source communities' (Brown and Peers 2013; Lonetree 2012). Influenced by these ideas, policies of engagement with Indigenous groups and the repatriation of significant materials have gone some way to alleviating historical tensions. In this paper, I provide an ethnographic account of how certain Aboriginal people in central Australia perceive and discuss their relationship to museums and museum

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professionals without enlisting the combative (us against them) discourse. In a quiet, yet self-assured way, these individuals suggest that museums would better meet their contemporary interests and predicaments if they could accept and integrate their own, local epistemological frameworks and ways of relating.

This paper draws upon three years of dissertation-related fieldwork amongst the Anmatyerr and to a lesser extent Arrernte people of central Australia between 2013 and 2016. During this time, I was able to discuss the return and repatriation of a range of highly significant objects, song recordings, films, photographs and manuscripts collected by the ethnographer T.G.H. Strehlow, as well as other related museum collections. As these collections contained content privy only to men (sacred objects, films of men's ceremonies and recordings of men's songs etc.), my interlocutors were necessarily male. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of this content requires me to deliberately avoid any description of the cultural information or objects being discussed and instead focus upon attitudes towards museum policy and practice in general.

Collaborative enquiry was at the heart of this research project. I understood that in order to know more about how Anmatyerr and Arrernte men discussed and conceptualised museum collections, an in-depth, collaborative ethnographic approach was required. By sharing collection documentation and other resources with those that possessed local cultural expertise, a fuller picture of how collections fit within contemporary social lives began to emerge. Critical to this process was a largely unstructured and free-flowing dialogue where the necessary time and space required for people to follow their own interests was provided. As I had known many of these men for a number of years already, the conversations were generally relaxed and the collections being discussed (being so stimulating and significant to local religious belief) easily inspired conversation. As we examined and discussed various objects and texts together, the nature of the museum/community relationship came to the fore.

The Anmatyerr have a rather specific relationship to museums that does not necessarily represent the experience of all central Australian, let alone Australian Aboriginal people. Unlike their neighbours, the Arrernte, Anmatyerr traditional lands have never hosted a sizeable township, mission or government settlement and their interactions with settlers have been shaped almost solely by a long-term engagement with pastoralism (Carew 2010; Turpin, Green, and Gibson 2016). The Anmatyerr have also received far less attention from ethnographers and museum collectors. Many older men Anmatyerr (and Arrernte) men did however work very closely with the linguist/ethnographer and museum collector T.G.H. Strehlow in the 1950s and 60s and permitted him to collect their sacred objects and document their ceremonial practices (Hill 2003). This very specific and relatively recent history of engagement and exchange with an ethnographer, as well as people's knowledge of other relevant museum collections, informs the particular views and opinions expressed below.

As much as I hope this paper will make an important contribution to a burgeoning body of literature about Indigenous influences on museum policies and practices worldwide (Glass 2015; McCarthy 2016; Morphy 2006, 2010), it also has a second aim of illuminating how Indigenous thinking and practices have been influenced by the museum. As a relatively remote, impoverished and isolated community of people with a distinct cultural identity (Green 2010; Young 1987), the Anmatyerr do not generally speak about museums and museum collections using the post-colonial discourses of Western liberal democracies. Deliberations about museum policy or practice are instead underscored

by their kin and social relations and their historical experience of interacting with settler colonial institutions and non-Indigenous peoples. Similar to the Pintupi of Australia's Western Desert who have been shown to reflect deeply on the circulation of early acrylic paintings that were collected in the 1970s (Myers 2002, 2014), the Anmatyerr are confident in the importance of their own socio-cultural frameworks when dealing with collecting institutions. They have a complex and thoughtful understanding of the history of collecting and for the future of collected materials. When in dialogue with museum scholars they value continuity in a time of immense change and attempt to ensure the emphasis remains with the incorporative structures and divisions of responsibilities within Anmatyerr society.

The Strehlow collection

Museum collections most pertinent to the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia, and in particular the Anmatyerr, are either held by the Melbourne Museum or the South Australian Museum (in Adelaide). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous anthropologists and missionaries collected thousands of items of cultural material from this region and later sold or donated them to state collecting institutions (Jones 1995; Griffiths 1996, 67–83). The next wave of collectors swept through the region again in the mid-twentieth century and similarly amassed private or state collections in the country's capital cities. The most expansive collector in this part of Australia during this time however was the linguist/anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow. Strehlow had been born at the Hermannsburg Mission in 1908 and grown up conversant in Arrernte and its related languages. Later in life he used these skills to help him record and document the most treasured songs, mythologies, dances and rituals of central Australian men (Gibson 2017; Hill 2003; Jones 2004).

Strehlow's ethnographic collection is now regarded as 'the most complete collection of cultural material of a First Peoples in Australia and possibly the world' (Perkins 2016) and is highly valued by many in the Arrernte community (Angeles 2016; Malbunka 2004). Although material culture was not Strehlow's primary interest, and he spent most of his time on audio and visual documentation of songs and ceremonies, he did nonetheless collect over 1500 items of material culture including hundreds of sacred objects of stone and wood known as *tywerrenge* (also spelt *churinga* or *tjuringa*) that remain important to central Australian religious belief (Batty 2014). Following his death in 1978, his collection was bequeathed to his second wife Kathleen before being sold to the Northern Territory Government following years of intense negotiations (Hugo 1997). In 1991, a museum facility dedicated to housing this collection, the Strehlow Research Centre, was opened in the largest township in central Australia, Alice Springs. Although the Centre now made the collection accessible to central Australian people, it was criticised for its lack of direct Aboriginal involvement and its failure to repatriate sacred objects. As one visiting anthropologist described it, the Centre displayed a collection of 'lifeless objects' that had been 'stripped of their contexts and reinstated in the reverential space of "art"' (Jackson 1995, 171) without any meaningful linkage to contemporary Aboriginal peoples.

Research on Aboriginal engagements with the Strehlow Research Centre have since been remarkably limited. Commentaries on how the collection is considered and utilised by Aboriginal people have been brief (Cawthorn and Cohen 2013; Galt-Smith 2001) and

most researchers have accepted the idea (promulgated by Strehlow) that central Australian culture is in such severe decline that Aboriginal knowledge of the content is deficient. This notion is summed up by one historian who wrote that the collection is now so ‘*mysterious*’ to Aboriginal people that they ‘themselves are *unsure* of *who* may see *what*’ (Smith 2009, 85–86 italics added). These assumptions, although easily challenged via collaborative ethnographic enquiry, have had an enormous impact on the way this collection has been managed.

Complexities of repatriation

In the perceived absence of any authoritative Australian Aboriginal thinking about future handling and use of this collection, the task of designing policies and protocols for this material has largely fallen to non-Indigenous museum professionals. This is not in itself a self-evident problem as I would agree with Glass (2015, 19–20); ethnographic collections are ‘co-constructed to a significant degree’ in as much as they ‘emerge from social encounter and interaction’. I also suggest however that these policies and practices need to be further developed through greater attention to Arrernte and Anmatyerr ontologies and social relations. Instead, there have been increasing moves towards wholesale repatriation as the principle means through which the wrongs of colonial collecting might be ameliorated, a position often championed by an ‘obsessive bureaucracy’ (Peers, Reinius, and Shannon 2017, 1) within the state apparatus and museums. Policies of repatriation are now the principal means through which central Australian Aboriginal stakeholders, indeed many Indigenous people across the world, engage with the museum sector. Whereas repatriation presents complexities and anxieties for Anmatyerr and Arrernte people, the return of these collections also produces generative sites of intercultural interaction, encounter and exchange. From this vantage point we can see that it is not a broad-scale, non-Indigenous perception of what is required that is preferable; what is needed is the collaborative formation of policy around museum collections at the local level.

In 2005 the *Strehlow Research Centre Act* was amended to allow for repatriation of collection items to ‘traditional owners’.¹ While the political and moral intent of this move is clear, the following discussion reveals the various issues that arise when the prospects of ‘repatriation’ are discussed with Arrernte and Anmatyerr men. Repatriation has been a significant aspect of the relationship between Indigenous populations and museums in settler states like Australia, the United States and Canada for a number of decades, either through legislative interventions such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, or various policy moves at the institutional or state level (Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association 1994; Australian Government 2013; Board of the South Australian Museum 1986). Once the great accumulators of ethnographica for museums, anthropologists and museum curators now working in this environment have increasingly had to work at ‘de-collecting’ objects and returning them to the sites where they were originally collected (Anderson 1995; Turnbull and Pickering 2010). In this policy context, the objectives of repatriation and return have had a significant influence on the nature of the Aboriginal community and museum relationships.

The complexities involved in the repatriation of physical objects, and in particular Australian ritual or religious materials, have been well documented. Some communities have altered their religious practice and no longer desire ‘classical’ or ‘traditional’ items

(Akerman 2010), others see these materials as being ‘too dangerous’ (meaning that the ritual knowledge to handle this material is lacking) to accept (Bradley and Kearney 2011) and other objects are subject to serious disputes over ownership (Austin-Broos 2009, 177–179; Batty 2014). The argument for the repatriation of sacred materials in Central Australia has nonetheless been well received where particular items are relatively easily reintegrated into contemporary lifeworlds. As former Director of the Strehlow Research Centre, Scott Mitchell, has written: ‘As part of a living culture, in a sense, these objects have a life of their own. They don’t belong in a museum’ (2012). By contrast, it is for this reason that secular items such as hunting or domestic tools or artworks, even though they may possess other cultural values exterior to the religious (see Hill, Bradley, and Standfield 2017), have never been subject to repatriation claims in central Australia (Pickering 2015, 430).

Repatriation claims in this part of Australia have thus been squarely focused on ritual objects and invoke notions of the ‘sacred’ in a Western cadence. In accepting the language however, Indigenous peoples in Australia and elsewhere have, as both Glass (2004, 119–120) and Johnson (2007, 12) point out, been able to successfully communicate to legislators and museums how certain materials need to be afforded high cultural status. Emphasis on the return of objects ‘of contemporary religious and ceremonial significance’ (Museum Victoria 2016, 3) often has the specific objective of assisting in the restitution of traditions damaged by colonisation, however this overlooks the deeper and more long-term collaborative arrangements that may be possible. As discussed below, collaboration of this type is consistently recommended by some Anmatyerr men as being more attractive than wholesale repatriation. Successful moves in this direction however, would require greater acknowledgement of the dialogical and historical complexities of ethnographic collections and the difficult task of incorporating Indigenous epistemologies and relationships into museum practice.

Returning the collection

I came to understand the complexity of the Anmatyerr and Arrernte relationship with museums in the early stages of my dissertation research. Most senior men acknowledged the complicated history of how Strehlow and other central Australian ethnographers amassed their collections and they viewed museums as important repositories for their cultural heritage. As much as they noted the asymmetrical power relations of the colonial era, their sentiments largely tallied with Pickering’s observation that ‘by far the majority’ of these objects were ‘acquired through legitimate purchase, trade, or gifting’ (2015, 429). In this unequal environment though, people offered their cultural expertise and most valued cultural possessions as a form of currency. As Paddy Willis Kemarr, a senior Anmatyerr elder aged 80s described it, ‘a long time [ago] I think they sell them [objects] for tucker and tobacco. Poor buggers’.² To Paddy and most other older Arrernte and Anmatyerr men, these people struggled to adjust to the rapidly changing cultural, religious and economic world of the twentieth century, but did so with considerable agency. Interactions with the regions key collectors, Francis Gillen and TGH Strehlow, were discussed in mostly positive terms because they had engaged in meaningful and long-term relationships with significant elders (Rubuntja in Kimber 2011, v; also Gibson 2017, 261–262). Desert ethnography was, as Smith puts it, characterised by a ‘profound intellectual exchange between elite members of two very different societies’ (2013, 341).

Over three years I visited seven different Anmatyerr communities and discussed the history of object collecting with numerous Anmatyerr men. At Ti Tree, for example, whilst reading through Strehlow's diary and examining his illustrations of some the artefacts he had collected, one of the elders recognised an object belonging to his father. The shape and the specific iconography depicted on each item referenced a particular *Anengkerr* (Dreaming) which belonged to this man and the objects had been 'missing' for years. Strehlow's description, written down whilst conversing with this man's father over eighty years ago, confirmed the elder's interpretation. 'Bring him back!' he insisted. 'My old brother was looking for him [the object]. That must be *that tywerreng* now. We've been looking for that one!'³ To the men that wanted their objects back, the original payments made to Strehlow were superfluous to the ongoing, continuous claims they had as senior descendants and owners. If returned to their owners, the objects could be used again at 'business time' [during annual initiation ceremonies].

For other Anmatyerr men though, asking for the return of these objects, when they were knowingly sold or traded, was thought to be somewhat inappropriate. Knowing full well the unequal conditions in which his 'old people' had mostly traded or sold these items to Strehlow and others, some elders maintained that the moral imperative was to uphold the original agreement. 'They [past elders] sold them for tucker and rations. We can't ask for them back. You can't take back what you sold!'⁴ Chris Anderson, a former repatriation anthropologist with the South Australian Museum, has documented similar cases where senior men insist on making some sort of compensation to museums for any objects returned to them (1995, 12). Disrupting the assumed logic of a simple hand-back or return of this cultural property, these men instead appealed to historical circumstance and the validity of the original exchange. Repatriating the Strehlow materials was not always a desired or achievable outcome.

The conventional characterisation of repatriation as a space of contestation, where Indigenous groups would battle with museum institutions for control of their cultural heritage, failed to encapsulate these complex attitudes. The Strehlow Research Centre and a number of other museums with significant central Australian collections have been eagerly seeking out traditional owners with claims to material for many years.⁵ In the case of the Strehlow collection there was equal if not more interest in improved access to Strehlow's vast archive song recordings and films of ceremonies. These recordings contain the intellectual, aesthetic and poetic depth of traditions under severe threat and unlike physical *tywerreng* objects which were often personal property, are part of arguably a more important aspect of contemporary religious practice.⁶ Understanding that these recordings were made on now obsolete technologies and also that digital copies could easily be made, people instead requested that better access to the collection overall be arranged. Improved access, better outreach services and sincere engagement with senior cultural experts were commonly expressed as essential to future handling of the collection.

The Akwerrperl materials

I will now reflect upon my experience of discussing a specific part of this collection with two of the last informants to T.G.H. Strehlow still alive, Ken Tilmouth Penangk and Harold Payne Mpetyan. Both of these men had performed in front of Strehlow's

cameras and tape recorders as young men, first in 1965 and then again in 1971, and both of their fathers had offered Strehlow objects for his collection (see Strehlow 1965, 1971). By this time, Strehlow had been recording and collecting in the region for over thirty years and was well known to most people. Ken and Harold had participated in the making of ritual paraphernalia, often conducted according to ritual protocol, and had witnessed their subsequent handing over to Strehlow. As Aboriginal perspectives on these types of exchanges are few and far between, it is worth taking some time delving into their interactions with Strehlow in more detail.

When Strehlow arrived at Alcoota Station in 1968 he quickly struck up good relations with the local elders. Possessing the rather rare ability amongst non-Indigenous peoples to speak Arrernte (and its related dialect Anmatyerr), Strehlow immediately impressed the men here. It was soon agreed that Ken's father, Mick Werlaty Pengart, would enable Strehlow to film and document what was described as the 'inner cycle' of ceremonies associated with Akwerrperl (Korbula), a significant honey ant centre nearby to Alcoota Station (Strehlow 1965). Over the course of a number of weeks, Strehlow collected thirty-two objects associated with these ceremonies and he produced numerous colour photographs and moving picture film of the proceedings and recorded hours of sacred song. Taking photographs of the objects collected, as well as copies of the song and filmic material with me to Alcoota on a number of occasions between 2012 and 2013, I was able to delve deeper into attitudes towards the Strehlow Research Centre and museums in general. It became evident that most men had little interest in formal repatriation of the materials.

Many of the objects had already been replaced with 'fresh ones' soon after Strehlow departed in the 1960s and others were never intended for long-term keeping. As many of the items collected were intentionally ephemeral, designed for single use before being dismantled or destroyed, the prospect of their return to the community was considered somewhat confronting and certainly anomalous.⁷ Moreover, as four decades had elapsed since these objects were collected and Anmatyerr ritual and ceremonial practices had evolved and developed, the reintegration of this material could be difficult. As Morphy has similarly observed in Northern Australia, Yolngu people too have never shown a 'strong demand for objects to be reincorporated decades or even centuries after their removal (2015, 94). In these parts of central and northern Australia, religious life has continued but traditions have changed, ceremonies have come in and out of favour and deep ritual knowledge has attenuated. To the older Anmatyerr men who were confident in their cultural knowledge, museum collections were regarded as secondary to their more immediate, practical, everyday concerns. Although museum collections were regarded as historically precious and, in many cases, embodying significant cultural value, they were not seen as being critical to the ongoing work of advancing knowledge of 'country'. If younger generations were really going to know about 'country' - meaning the objectification of the Dreaming in cultural geography, ceremony and social lives - the edification had to be grounded in sociality, practice and the everyday. As Tilmouth expressed it:

Just leave it [the collection] there. This mob [the men in his community] is alright. Everyone know this country, our country. No worry because this mob *know* you see? All the youngfellas. We're teaching them all the time you see? We teaching them *akiw* [in the ceremonial camp for young men].⁸

Tamara Bray, an anthropologist working on similar issues with First Nations people in North America, has similarly commented that it is ultimately 'misguided' to think that the return of museum artefacts will help 'maintain' cultural practices (1996, 442). Cultural identity, she reminds us, does not reside in objects or texts, but is fundamentally mediated, adapted and reproduced through social relations. Moreover, the revivification of historical material is not always a high priority for marginalised groups who might suffer from the ravishes of impoverishment, disempowerment or colonial annexation. As I embarked on the processes of returning Strehlow's collection, it was similarly demonstrated to me that what took precedence in Anmatyerr communities was the upholding of underlying relationships, social contexts, religious beliefs and practices. It was the reintegration of museum materials into this social milieu that offered most in terms of meaning generation. The overly simplistic notion that objects or texts could simply be put 'back in their place' as an act of cultural 'restoration' (Forrest 2012, 132–223) overlooked these complexities and ultimately supported an ideological conceptualisation of Indigenous culture/s as being outside of global/historical processes and somewhat impervious to change.

The ceremonial objects that had originally been collected from Ken Tilmouth in the late 1960s continued to be regarded as culturally and ritually significant, but they were also understood as possessing historical value. In this sense they had accumulated additional value as testaments to a particular time in the lives of Anmatyerr people when experts in ceremonial performance shared aspects of their knowledge with T.G.H. Strehlow. The extent of this sharing with a non-Indigenous person was recognised as being extremely rare and thus part of a larger intercultural history in central Australia. Given that these objects had been handed to Strehlow by multiple senior men and in accordance with strict ritual protocols, the suggestion that they now be 'given back' seemed incongruous. The rhetoric of repatriation did not adequately account for the many complexities that had gathered around these materials.

On the various occasions when Strehlow Research Centre staff asked if Ken would like to see the return of these objects he responded with caution. 'What are you going to do?', he enquired on one occasion, wanting to know more about what this concept of 'repatriation' actually entailed.⁹ Like many other Anmatyerr men, Ken exhibited a scepticism, perhaps even a suspicion, that any change in the current relationship might further subsume Anmatyerr understandings of these collections under Western legal concepts and protocols. Having never personally requested that the materials to be returned to him, he reminded everyone that the original exchange with Strehlow had been mutual. Even if the 'repatriation' was only to occur 'on paper' and the objects stayed in the care of the museum as had been suggested by Centre staff as a possibility, questions still remained about how the items would be recorded as 'belonging' to Ken and his descendants. There was also concern about how recognition of personal and kin rights might be upheld in the long-term, as well as uncertainty about how future generations might be affected by any decisions made today.

Wanting to be true to the historical relationships that these objects instantiated as well as the specific cultural rights and responsibilities inherent in them, Anmatyerr men began to suggest alternative ways of navigating museum/community relationships. These counter options were derived from a distinctively Anmatyerr view and offered suggestions about how museums might be subsumed within Anmatyerr social frameworks. Rather

than having to respond to proposals couched in Western political, moral and legal discourses, these men suggested that settler-colonial institutions and agents work in accordance with central Australian protocols.

The Kwertengerl proposal

It was whilst engaged in these discussions about the complexities and anxieties of repatriation that a sub-discourse around museum and community relations arose. Where direct repatriation was not sought after, where definitive ownership could not be ascertained, or where the ritual knowledge needed to control powerful items was deficient, it was suggested that museums accept cultural responsibility. In these cases, most men indicated that they expected collecting institutions and their staff to care for their materials in the same manner as a *kwertengerl*, a ritual assistant or manager in traditional contexts.¹⁰ Critically, this proposal was not informed by discourses relating to the functioning of collecting institutions or state sponsored repatriation initiatives, but in terms of Anmatyerr or Arrernte notions of rights, responsibilities and models of care; specifically, the idea that museums should accept the accountabilities of a *kwertengerl*.

The term *kwertengerl*, and its equivalent in other Australian Aboriginal languages, has been the subject of considerable attention in the anthropological literature for some time (Meggitt 1962). Often translated into English as ‘managers’ ‘guardians’ or ‘offsiders’ of land and ritual who work in tandem with their ‘owners’, the idea of a *kwertengerl* denotes an important social role often found in many parts of Australia (Morphy and Morphy 1984; Nash 1982, 1984; Young 1981).¹¹ For Sutton, the dual roles of the ‘manager’ and ‘owner’ are a ‘ritual based system of formalised complementary filiation’ (Sutton 2003, 194), whereby (using the Arandic terminology) the *kwertengerl* – who are related to the *merek-artwey* (owner, boss or custodian) via their mother’s and their mother’s brother’s country – manage, advise and protect the ritual knowledge and sites possessed by the *merek-artwey*. The *kwertengerl* (managers) therefore play an important role in helping the *merek-artwey* (owners) maintain the integrity and long-term transmission of their estate (place) based rituals, songs, dances and so on.¹² Likened to a ‘governance structure’ by some Warlpiri people (Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes, and Box 2008) these complementary tasks ensure that everyone within this network of relatedness has a role to play.

I first heard museum staff and their institutions being likened to *kwertengerl* in 2013 during Ken Tilmouth’s visit to the Melbourne Museum with six Arrernte men. These men had been brought to the museum using funding allocated by the Commonwealth government’s Indigenous Repatriation Program to explore its large holdings of sacred objects and discuss repatriation options. The collection manager responsible for ‘Restricted Collections’ was immediately identified and referred to by the group as ‘our *kwertengerl*’. Later, the curator for these collections was also described using the ‘*kwertengerl*’ descriptor. As this particular staff member had been known to many of these Aboriginal men since the 1980s and thus understood the fundamentals of their socio-cultural practices, he was directly invited to see his professional role through this *merek-artwey/kwertengerl* dynamic.¹³ Being a ‘good’ curator the men explained, aligned with being a ‘good *kwertengerl*’ in the sense that he would be reminded to personally care for these objects and uphold their integrity on behalf of ‘owners’ (*merek-artwey*). When I returned

to the Alcoota community later that same year, I heard the term being used more widely to refer to other museum staff and other interested researchers, including myself.

The frequency with which this designation was being used required serious consideration. It became increasingly apparent how often the concept informed discussions about the prospects of museum collections and how it was applied to museum and professional staff regardless of their cultural background (indigenous or non-Indigenous). Ken reiterated the importance of *kwertengerl* relationships to me one morning at Alcoota. Pointing directly at me as I wrote down his thoughts on ownership and rights in the Akwerrperl material, he explained the expanded cultural responsibilities of all of those people who had now become involved. From their point of collection, and in the decades since, these materials had become entangled in complex, intercultural relationships. 'You're my *kwertengerl akin* [as well]. You write this one, see. Make 'em *arrayt-ilem*.' [You keep accurate/truthful documentation].¹⁴ Turning to the Strehlow Research Centre anthropologist (also a white, middle aged male) he again reiterated the position. 'You're my *kwertengerl* too. Same. Your hand does this one [making writing motion/gesture] on this one ... paper ... paper-one ... That's *kwertengerl* now. They do it that way. *Alakenh* [that is how it is done]'.¹⁵

The inference was clear. Those now implicated in the care of these collections were to act in a similar way to *kwertengerl* in the ritual setting. By documenting the rights and interests of the owners (*merek-artwey*) and thus upholding their rights to the materials, we would be honouring their local, social and cultural significances. The act of writing or documentation, as Ken alluded, also had parallels with one of the key responsibilities of *kwertengerl* – the art of decorating (commonly referred to as 'painting up') the owners (*merek-artwey*) prior to the enactment of a ceremonial performances (Pink 1936, 302). In order to do this though, the *kwertengerl* must have intimate knowledge of the designs and other aspects of these rituals so they can properly oversee the performance and custodianship of the traditions. By sharing in this knowledge and seeing that it is correctly enacted, the 'managers' uphold these traditions without challenging the *merek-artwey's* ultimate rights, which are patrilineally inherited.

Assimilated into these local frameworks of social relatedness, museums and their staff were being regarded as 'working for' Anmatyerr or Arrernte people. Similar to what Myers has observed amongst other groups in central Australia, Western forms of authority are often expected to be responsible for 'looking after' or 'caring for' Aboriginal people and their interests (1980, 1991, 283–284). The Anmatyerr presume the same type of participation from museums and their staff. I had this pointed out to me, in a slightly different way, after playing recordings of restricted initiation songs (held at the Melbourne Museum) to men in the community of Napperby. It was a dark night and the glow from the firelight only partially revealed people's expressions, but as the songs played, I could hear the men talking quietly amongst themselves about how many of these songs should never have been recorded because they are 'too dangerous'.¹⁶ When asked what should be done with these recordings, one man replied 'Give them to a *warl-parl* [whitefella] to look after. Aboriginal people in town can't be trusted with these things. They're too dangerous'.¹⁷

Statements like this clearly run counter to the progressive political agenda of Indigenous self-determination but challenge museums to 'work for' Anmatyerr people by taking on cultural responsibilities that emanate from non-European conceptions of cultural

property. In 2015, this alternative model of care was again presented during a large meeting of male curators from Australia's largest museums and senior Arrernte and Anmatyerr men. The men had come together to discuss the large holding of male-only sacred objects and to design future projects under the Indigenous Repatriation Program. Noting the important role of certain museum staff who had been committed to community consultations about this material for decades, two Arrernte men went as far as suggesting that museum staff should be issued with official '*Kwertengerl*' identification badges. They argued that these badges would reinforce personal responsibility to Arrernte people and ensure that communities understood and respected the important role now played by collecting institutions.¹⁸ As it was actually more common for curators to be entering into Aboriginal communities seeking to repatriate objects than it was for Aboriginal men to be initiating demands on museums, there was a general sentiment amongst the group that they now needed to 'help the museum'.

Challenges and opportunities

If one applies the system of formalised complementary filiation to the management of these collections then the 'owners' would undoubtedly be Anmatyerr *merək-artwey* and the *kwertengerl*, the museum. It would be folly however, to take these suggestions too literally. Most of the collecting institutions are composed of people unrelated to Arrernte or Anmatyerr communities and can thus never operate as the genuine *kwertengerl* who are by definition, deeply imbricated in the social bonds and cultural responsibilities of familial relations. The metaphor is worth pursuing however because even if the museum fails to perform these functions completely and misunderstandings and misinterpretations occur, these types of interactions may usher in new approaches that acknowledge and apply Anmatyerr/Arrernte values. Out of the 'disjunctive space' that is created when differing interpretative communities meet (Morphy 2010, 281), new more overtly reciprocal museum/community relations may emerge.

In accordance with central Australian custom, particular songs, ceremonies or religious objects would also have to be acknowledged (and be recorded by the museum) as belonging to particular individuals or clan/estate groups. However, the fluid ways in which custodianship over objects are conferred via unfolding processes of generational change, different levels of knowledge acquisition, changes in ritual status etc., will present significant challenges for museums who, for good reasons, have tended to maintain a distance from such intensely local/personal concerns. The work of noting and monitoring claims to ownership would in itself present significant challenges. This would require staff to not only possess a familiarity with the various families and individuals involved, but have a firm understanding of how different rights are bestowed and withdrawn in accordance with Anmatyerr/Arrernte law.

Museums therefore need to open up spaces for dialogue with people in central Australia and work with ideas that challenge existing dominant, academic, bureaucratic and legalistic frameworks. The somewhat symbiotic model of care being proposed by Anmatyerr men, while not readily aligning with liberal socio-political agendas, urges museum professionals to work in the messy and often complicated intercultural worlds of central Australian Aboriginal people. Rather than retreating to idealised conceptions of Indigenous peoples, their proposition suggests a pivot towards greater attentiveness to different

epistemological frameworks and localised forms of governance around cultural property. This means resisting any tendency to pan-Aboriginalise the handling of these collections and instead work directly with those who have acquired knowledge of, and rights to express knowledge through, sequences of initiation and exchange.

The following measures, already piloted by the Strehlow Research Centre, could also be trialled and adopted by other major Australian museums. The first involves a partial reorganisation of the collection store so that objects that were once arranged by object type or size, are now regrouped according to association with a particular estate/clan grouping. The objects related to the site of Akwerrperl, for example, are either boxed together or kept in close proximity to each other so that the cultural linkages and integrity of the items can be maintained. Reorganisation along these lines can present significant storage difficulties when the physical dimensions of the gathered objects are variable. Once grouped together though, archival boxes and shelving can then be relabelled with further pertinent cultural information such as the name of the totem/s represented and the sacred sites to which the material relates.

The second, and certainly more difficult task, is the work of identifying and documenting the names of people with rights to particular items. If museums were to perform a *kwertengerl*-like role then they would be required to document the names of these people and record the various complexities of individual and groups rights to certain objects. As noted above, this is no easy task. Many museum anthropologist/curators across Australia have ways of documenting these relationships but the practice is far from consistent. In response to requests from men like Ken Tilmouth, the Strehlow Research Centre has begun to document the names of men with specific rights to material, but this documentation will require careful updating as elders pass away and decisions are made and remade about who is, or is not, permitted to access this highly sensitive cultural material. The museum can never replace the real *kwertengerl* of ceremonies, objects, songs and stories, but it can help in upholding Anmatyerr principles of access. The Strehlow Research Centre already fields access requests and makes determinations, but if they enter into these dynamics any further, they run the risk of setting themselves up as arbiters and adjudicators of cultural rights. Museums must be cognisant then that if they accept the invitation to act as *kwertengerl*, they will have to balance this against their obligations as independent, publicly funded collecting institutions.

The expectation that museums will take steps to incorporate alternative models of care is nonetheless extremely significant. As the anthropologist Peter Sutton has noted, most Australian Aboriginal people who are 'steeped in the classical traditions' have always expected scholars and professionals who work in the Aboriginal domain to uphold the integrity of their religious, social and cultural practices (2010, 81 italics added). It is thus reasonable that they expect museums to listen carefully to these ideas and respond with collaboratively designed policies and practices. The traditional relationship between the *kwertengerl* and the *merek-artwey* is fundamentally a reciprocal one centred on 'ritual co-operation'. As the system works to integrate and bind the two groups together in accordance with their distinct roles and responsibilities (Pink 1936, 300), both groups would have to share in the accountabilities of caring for the tangible and intangible cultural materials contained in these collections.

In applying this logic to the management of central Australian ethnographic collections, ownership rights would need to unequivocally remain with the *merek-artwey*. The

collecting institutions and their associated anthropologists, curators and collection managers, would then have to care for and protect the ceremonial knowledge, artefacts and recordings of these people, under the guidance of specific owners. This presents a real opportunity for museums to learn from and adapt to a very different 'regime of value' (Myers 2001) where objects (archival, textual etc) are seen as producing relationships among and between people, including non-Indigenous people and institutions. As soon as objects were shared or sold to Strehlow, new relationships were instigated that do not end once the physical transaction of materials (as commodities) had occurred. Perhaps unwittingly then, collecting institutions have been conceptually annexed by Anmatyerr and Arrernte men who now seek to remind us of this entangled history.

Conclusion

The suggestion from Anmatyerr men that Australian museums ought to now act in accordance with the roles and responsibilities of a *kwertengerl* presents a significant challenge to the sector. The ethnographic account presented here submits that there is an observable desire amongst many senior Anmatyerr and Arrernte men that museums ought to be integrated, at least partially, into their own forms of relationship. The perspectives of men that worked directly with TGH Strehlow in the late 1960s suggest that their original interactions with him were based upon similar assumptions. The relationship, they argue, should certainly uphold traditional ownership rights, but at the same time ensure that museums understand their accountabilities in caring for this material – significantly not necessarily for the public good – but on behalf of central Australian people. To respect these relationships is not, as Myers (2014, 84) has similarly argued, to 'engage in an abstract political correctness' but to appreciate collections 'in their genuine complexity'.

It has only been via deep and long-term collaborative research with Anmatyerr men that I have come to these conclusions. Amongst the Anmatyerr people, the Strehlow Research Centre and some of the other museums are being repositioned. As spaces open up for meaningful engagement, often via discussions regarding repatriation, a deeper invitation to develop reciprocal relationships is evident. The now consistently heard remark that museums should act responsibly as *kwertengerl*, reflects the local understanding that the collections are more than heritage items; these collections are an extension of the people and the relationships they instantiate.

Notes

1. See: <https://legislation.nt.gov.au/en/Legislation/STREHLOW-RESEARCH-CENTRE-ACT>.
2. Pers Comm. P. Willis 10/92013 at Ti Tree.
3. Pers Comm. A. Mpetyan 6/6/2014 at Ti Tree.
4. Field Notebook, 19th April 2015.
5. See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-24/sacred-aboriginal-objects-returned-to-central-australia/8736876>.
6. The Strehlow Research Centre Act include these resources and manuscript material in its definition of 'objects' that may be repatriated.
7. I have not gone into the nature of the objects as they are considered secret-sacred and not for public discussion.

8. Ken Tilmouth, Alcoota Field recording, file 04062014 part 3.
9. Field Notebook, Alcoota, 15/08/2013.
10. The term is spelt kwertengerle in Arrernte and Kurdungurlu in Warlpiri.
11. In other parts of Australia equivalent groups are known as *kirda* (Warlpiri), *mangaya* (Warumungu), *gidjan* (Jawoyn), *ngimirringki* (Yanyuwa) etc.
12. *Kwertengerl* may also be recruited from *classificatory* kinsmen from the opposite moiety with appropriate subsections *and* knowledge or seniority to fulfil these roles. For example, the *kwertengerl* for people of the Pwerrerl subsection are Ngwarray.
13. Field Notebook. 30/4//2013.
14. Field Notebook at Alcoota 15/8/2013.
15. Field Notebook at Alcoota 15/8/2013.
16. An almost identical reaction from men listening to similar (perhaps the same) songs that were recorded by Spencer and Gillen's in 1901 (Gibson 2015, 178).
17. Field notes from Napperby 2/11/2016. I have decided not to name people given the sensitivities associated with these recordings.
18. This comment was made during a discussion of museum responsibilities to these objects at the Strehlow Research Centre, 9/8/15.

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