

# Indigenous Archives Through Time and Space: Towards a Continuum Model to explain the complex contexts of Indigenous Archives

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## **Introduction**

The Records Continuum Model was developed at Monash University in the 1990s by Frank Upward and his colleagues to help understand the multiple contexts in which records are created and used through time and space by multiple stakeholders from multiple perspectives.<sup>1</sup> In Continuum thinking, records are “always in a process of becoming”<sup>2</sup> since their contexts and uses are always susceptible to change. Continuum models provide an encompassing framework for looking at multiple uses of records over time and space in ways that acknowledge the cultural contexts and values that underpin them and the agency of the subjects of the records as co-creators of the records. Over the years, variations of the Records Continuum Model have been developed to explain different contexts of use of information resources. I have personally proposed two models that better explain special recordkeeping processes that cannot be easily mapped onto the original model. The Appropriated Archive Continuum Model was developed to explain the processes that take place when archives are politically appropriated by a new authority following a violent regime change.<sup>3</sup> The Repurposed Archive Continuum Model was developed to explain the special processes that must take place when archives, which had been accumulated as organisational records, are later reclaimed by the subjects of the records as their own records.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I propose to use both these models to represent the complex contexts of Indigenous archives.

Numerous Indigenous records (e.g. artefacts, stories and songs) were misappropriated during the colonial and post-colonial era. They were then interpreted and reinterpreted in new contexts outside of their culture of origin by people who in effect created new records and built new archives. Some of these records were later reclaimed by their rightful owners, leading to a repurpose of archives which had been accumulated for different purposes, while some of the records

were actually repatriated and reincorporated into Indigenous archives. I show how Continuum models may help to understand how Indigenous archives were misappropriated during the colonial and post-colonial era, reinterpreted when included in colonial and post-colonial archives, and again when reclaimed or repatriated, and why these complex contexts necessitate the application of recordkeeping processes that are different from those applied to other archival records and that must be designed by the Indigenous communities who are the rightful owners of the records.

### **A Continuum Perspective**

Continuum theory may appear complex. Some of the core Continuum writings are very dense. However, the Records Continuum Model was developed by practitioners for practitioners,<sup>5</sup> and the concepts that underpin the model can be explained in simple terms.

I will start with a story. I am part of a team at Monash University who are working in collaboration with Oxfam Bangladesh and Oxfam Australia on a project to empower women in rural Bangladesh through the use of mobile phones,<sup>6</sup> and I am personally working on the information management side of the project. In July 2018, I travelled to Bangladesh and met with staff from the partner organisations in Dhaka and at the district and village levels. In a very isolated area of rural Bangladesh, an NGO officer asked me in broken English what information management is and how “it can change our lives.” That is a big thing to explain in five minutes. I guess that he was hoping that I could provide him with a blueprint or a checklist to follow, but that would go against our participatory approach and our intention to develop systems that are based on the local information preferences, practices and values.<sup>7</sup> I did not have time to explain the information culture framework developed by Gillian Oliver and Fiorella Foscarini<sup>8</sup> which I had used a few days earlier at a workshop at the National Archives of Bangladesh. Therefore, what I described to him in five minutes is what constitutes a Continuum perspective and I emphasised two points:

- Think of all the possible uses of the records now and in the future before they are created.
- Think of all the people who will want to access and use the records.

That is the essence of a Continuum perspective: to think from the time before the records are created of all the possible uses of the records and all the people who will need them, and therefore to:

- Develop systems that will make it possible for all the stakeholders to access and use the records when they will need them and that will protect the rights of the subjects of the records.

I am thinking here of the right of access to the records and the right of privacy, which often conflict with one another, and also of the right to find in the records the information that people will need in the future, which implies that that information should have been captured in the first place.

### **The Records Continuum Model**

When I teach the model at Monash University, I focus on the dimensions. They are the most important part of the model (see Figure 1). The total number of labels on the model can be distracting and people can easily get confused by the terminology. The first dimension, Create, is where actions take place. People are having transactions with others. Documents, or inscriptions to use a broader term,<sup>9</sup> are created, which leave a trace that a transaction has taken place. The second dimension, Capture, is where the inscriptions are captured in recordkeeping systems and metadata is added to them so that they can be later used as evidence. The third dimension, Organise, looks at recordkeeping processes at the organisation's level. The records are organised to become part of an organisational archive or an individual archive so that they can be used as memory for the organisation or individual. In the fourth dimension, Pluralise, the archives get out of the organisation that created and managed them, and they are used by others outside the organisation for other purposes.<sup>10</sup> They can then serve as collective social, historical and cultural memory for the broader society.

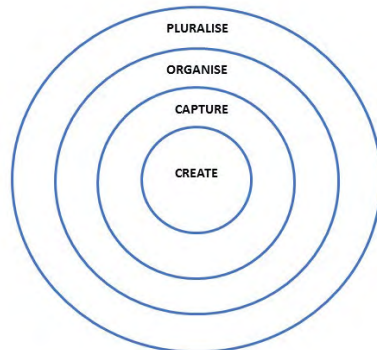


Figure 1. The 4 dimensions of the Records Continuum Model

A key component to understanding the model is to recognise that the four dimensions are not phases or stages. They do not always follow each other in a fixed order. The four dimensions coexist because a record can be perceived differently by different users at the same time. The thresholds between the dimensions are not natural stages through which records pass after regular intervals, records can pass those thresholds or not pass them if they are not ready to move to the next dimension, or can pass them one way then go back, and they can be in both dimensions at the same time. The borders between the dimensions are not clear-cut steps. Records can move through some kind of threshold and be seen as being part of another dimension where they are perceived and used differently by different users in a different context and for different purposes. However, this move from one dimension to another is not definitive. The records can still be perceived by some users as being in the previous dimension. They can move back to the previous dimension or they can stay in a border area for some time. The way I see it, rather than a step up or down, or a door that may close, the threshold between two dimensions can be seen as a beaded curtain hanging in a doorway that allows movement in both ways, does not imply a change of level and is not a definitive move. One threshold can be skipped or two thresholds can be passed at the same time. This applies in particular to digital records, which can move from one dimension to another in a nanosecond when they are sent electronically from one system to another, or can be sent to the fourth dimension without having been properly captured in the second dimension, for example when pictures are uploaded on social media platforms.

The axes of the Records Continuum Model allow us to represent the people who are involved in each dimension, the activities they are involved in, the records they use, and what those records represent. The exact names of the 16 labels at the intersections of the axes and the dimensions are not important. What is important is to understand that they are associated with one of the dimensions and one of the axes.

Continuum terminology, and in particular the names of the labels on the Records Continuum Model, can be confusing, especially for people whose first language is not English. For example, the word “record” has no equivalent in French and in several other European languages. The French definition of archives: “all the documents, whatever their date, their form and their material support, created or received by a natural or legal person, or by a department or agency, public or private, in the course of their activities”<sup>11</sup> is similar to the definition of records in English.<sup>12</sup> In French-

speaking countries, archives are considered to be archives from the time they are created. There is no exact translation for the word “record”. The translation used in the International Standard on Records Management ISO 15489 adopted in 2001, “document d’archives”, literally a document from the archives, is one of the most commonly used. However, the new version of the standard adopted in 2016 uses “document d’activité”, literally “activity document” instead<sup>13</sup>. This translation was the subject of many controversies and, in practice, it is only used in official documents. The translation “documents d’archives” is still the most commonly used in the public sector where government institutions have long-standing archives and where staff understand that the important documents that they create will one day get transferred to the archives. On the other hand, in the private sector, archives are perceived as old stuff and people prefer to refer to their records as “documents”.<sup>14</sup> The absence of an exact translation for the word “record” in some languages has important implications for the understanding of the Records Continuum because if one comes from a cultural background where there is no distinction between records and archives, or between documents and records, the model can be difficult to understand and can easily be misinterpreted.

### **The Appropriated Archive Continuum Model**

The Records Continuum Model can be used as a diagnostic tool to analyse the recordkeeping processes that are applied in a specific situation.<sup>15</sup> Two of the cases in which I used the model as a diagnostic tool are presented in this paper. In both cases, I found that the original model could not adequately explain some issues that were specific to those two cases. This led me to develop two variations of the model, which can better map the processes that were applied in those two cases.

The Appropriated Archive Continuum Model<sup>16</sup> was developed when I analysed the Khmer Rouge archives that were seized by the Cambodian government which overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979.<sup>17</sup> The Khmer Rouge had engulfed Cambodia in a reign of terror after they came to power in April 1975. They killed, tortured and starved the population of Cambodia in their attempts at quickly rebuilding a country which had been devastated by massive American bombardments and at “purifying” its population. Over 2 million people, or a quarter of the population, died in the space of less than four years.<sup>18</sup> However, the Khmer Rouge were fastidious recordkeepers who kept records on the people they imprisoned and tortured in their political prisons. Not only did they keep lists and photographs of the prisoners, but they also forced them to

write their “confessions” under torture.<sup>19</sup> When the regime collapsed, the prison staff in one of the largest incarceration centres, Tuol Sleng, did not have the time to destroy their archive, which fell into the hands of the successor government. That government then started using the archive as evidence of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, an archive, which had been built as evidence against the enemies of the Khmer Rouge became evidence of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge against those people. An analysis of the processes that were applied to the archive reveals multiple problems in relation to the provenance of the archive, the way it was reconstructed and the way it was used for political reasons.<sup>20</sup> What I just want to highlight here is that the archive stopped being used for the purpose for which it had been created and started being used for totally different purposes in a different context after it was appropriated by the new government. This reuse of the archive for political reasons and the reorganisation of the archive that accompanied it go much further than ordinary curatorial processes. That is why I added an additional dimension between Organise and Pluralise to accommodate those processes. Since those processes were prompted by an external intervention, by outsiders who had appropriated the archive, I call this extra dimension “Appropriate”. The appropriation of the archive led to the re-creation of the records as new records in a different context. The records were re-created, re-captured and re-organised in a different context before being pluralised to be used by various actors for various reasons. This is why I represented the additional dimension as an arrow from one Records Continuum representation to another one (see Figure 2).

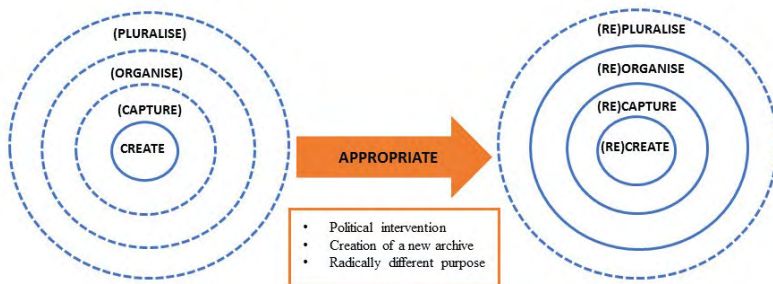


Figure 2. The Appropriated Archive Continuum Model

The addition of the *Appropriate* dimension enables us to put an emphasis on the processes that took place at the time of the appropriation of the archive: the creation of an archive different from the original one, the new descriptions and new uses given to the records, the political motivation that led to the reconstruction of the archive and the management of access to the records, and the lack of respect for traditional archival principles (provenance and original order). This also lets us question the reliability of those records as instruments of evidence and to propose new access rules that take into consideration the interests of the subjects of the records and of their communities.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of the Tuol Sleng Archive, the appropriation of the records occurred after the records had been organised in the context of an elaborate bureaucratic system. In other contexts, appropriation could take place before the documents are systematically captured and organised. The representation of the *Appropriate* dimension as an arrow between two *Records Continuum* diagrams rather than as an additional circle between the *Organise* and the *Pluralise* dimensions makes it possible for the model to accommodate an appropriation of records that would take place before they had been organised into an archive by the organisation that created them, or an appropriation of documents/inscriptions before they had been captured into a recordkeeping system. This is why the second, third and fourth dimensions are represented by dotted lines in Figure 2.

### **The Repurposed Archive Continuum Model**

The *Repurposed Archive Continuum Model*<sup>22</sup> was developed when I analysed the situation of the records of children who grew up in the welfare system in Australia in the 20th century. According to the 2003 Senate Inquiry on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children, more than half-a-million people experienced some form of institutional “care”<sup>23</sup> in Australia in the twentieth century in orphanages, children’s homes, or foster “care”.<sup>24</sup> When those children came back as adult *Care Leavers*<sup>25</sup> to request access to their records in order to make sense of what had happened to them during their childhood and to try to reconnect with their families, they found that in many cases the organisations that had looked after them did not have any records about them or were not willing to release them. Recordkeeping had often been minimal in institutions that looked after children, and many records were lost or destroyed.<sup>26</sup> The surviving records are scattered and have rarely been subject to professional or consistent archiving, making

them difficult to find.<sup>27</sup>

The records created by child welfare agencies were never intended to be released to the children after they left “care”.<sup>28</sup> They were administrative records that were compiled for the agencies’ use, not to meet the needs of the children that were taken “care” of or their adult selves.<sup>29</sup> In many cases, the records were only released in the Pluralise dimension following pressures from Care Leavers advocacy groups.<sup>30</sup> When they got access to their records, Care Leavers looked in them for details that could help them to figure out who they were and, in some cases, to find evidence that could support their claims for redress. In this way, they transformed the records into the opposite of what they had been created for. Records that had been kept as evidence that the organisations did their jobs well became evidence that the welfare agencies did not look after the children that were entrusted to them as they should have done. These processes implied a change of agency, with the Care Leavers who had been disempowered in the past claiming ownership of all the records about them.<sup>31</sup> Releasing records to Care Leavers who can then reuse and reinterpret them constitutes a repurpose of the archive. This is different from ordinary curatorial processes that take place in archives. I added an extra dimension to the Records Continuum between Organise and Pluralise to represent the time/space in which these processes are taking place. The key element in this additional dimension is the pressures from the Care Leavers, an outside intervention. Although it requires the cooperation of people inside the organisations, the impetus for change comes from the outside. The processes are driven by the Care Leavers who are reclaiming the records as their own. This is why I labelled this additional dimension “Reclaim” (see Figure 3).

The addition of the Reclaim dimension highlights the importance of applying processes to those records that are different from those applied to ordinary organisational records. In particular, the record holding organisations must explain the records, put them in context, and support those to whom they are released due to the gaps in the records and to the negative language in which they were often written. Record holding organisations need to be aware that the processes that they should apply when responding to Care Leavers’ requests should be different from the processes that they apply to other types of records. The fact that the records were not intended to be used by Care Leavers has the consequence that the records often need to be explained to them and that Care Leavers need to be offered support when accessing their

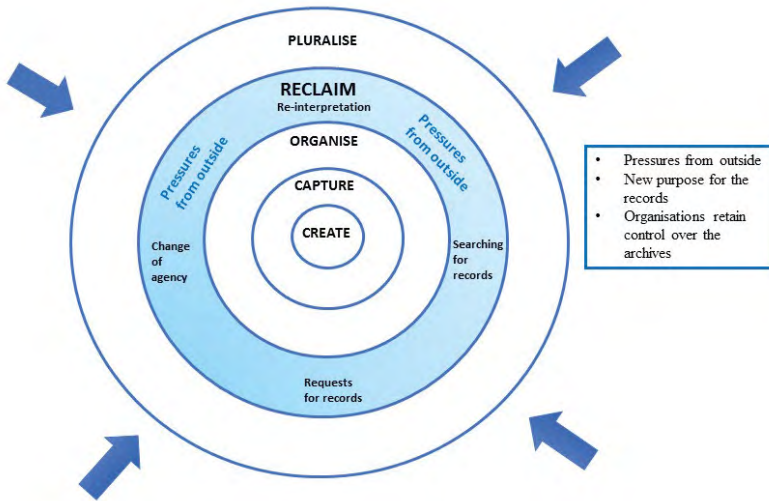


Figure 3. The Repurposed Archive Continuum Model

records. These processes are radically different from traditional archival curatorial processes since they are based on a change of agency and imply a repurpose, a change of the purpose of the archives. However, the organisational archives continue to exist and to operate as organisational archives. These archives are therefore different from the appropriated archives of the previous model.

### **Towards a Continuum Model for Indigenous Archives**

In this last section, I will bring together the two variations of the Continuum models that I have presented in this paper and use them to represent the complex contexts of Indigenous archives. Many Indigenous cultural objects were removed from the communities to which they belonged in the colonial and post-colonial period and incorporated into mainstream institutions where they were given other purposes and other meanings. I see this as a situation which can be represented by using the Appropriate Archive Continuum Model (see Figure 4). In this case, I prefer to call the additional dimension “Misappropriate” rather than “Appropriate” because the people who seized the Indigenous cultural objects were not their rightful owners, whereas in the case of the Khmer Rouge archives discussed previously, one could argue that the appropriation of the archive of a government agency by the successor

government constitutes normal administrative practice (although what they did with the archive subsequently does not).

Indigenous cultural objects are considered here in a broad sense. They can take many forms. They can include “oral and written records, literature, landscape, dance, art, the built environment, and artefacts”<sup>32</sup> insofar as these provide traces of Indigenous cultural heritage. In New Zealand, “[w]ritten documents, maps, images, and visual and sound recordings stand alongside oral traditions, stories, songs, dance, carvings, weavings, and other forms of memory-making”<sup>33</sup> as evidence of Māori cultural heritage.

The misappropriation of Indigenous cultural objects may have affected cultural objects that were not incorporated in a recordkeeping system (in a broad sense) or organised in an archive for a family, a group or a community. This is reflected by dotted lines for the second, third and fourth dimensions in Figure 4. Cultural objects, which are the repositories of memories, may have been misappropriated before they ever had any chance of being shared with their communities. Once removed from their communities, they were recreated as different records in different contexts, captured as evidence of something else (including as evidence of the inferiority of Indigenous cultures compared to Western cultures), organised in a new archive or museum, and in some cases pluralised.

Pressures from Indigenous communities fighting for their rights over their cultural heritage may lead to two different types of outcomes (see Figure 5). Either the archives can be repurposed in a way which recognises the legitimate rights of the subjects of the records and gives them access to the records, but with the records remaining under the control of the non-Indigenous record holding organisations. There may be some opportunities to work together at re-contextualising them and

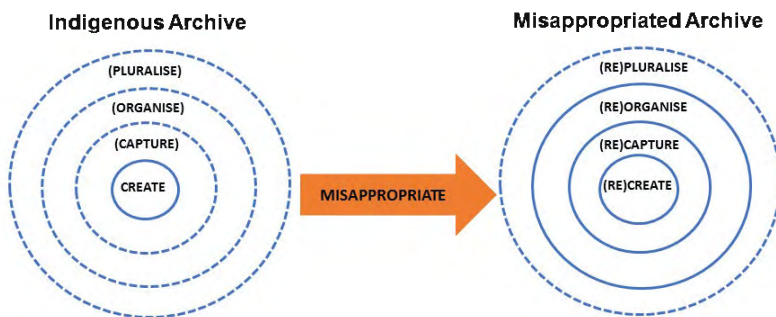


Figure 4. Colonial misappropriation of Indigenous archives

at making decisions about the ways in which they will be pluralised. That is why I used the label (Co-)pluralise rather than Pluralise or Re-pluralise in Figure 5. The second option is to repatriate the records to their original communities, or to Indigenous organisations that will assume the function of custodians of those records, so that they can be managed by Indigenous people in accordance with Indigenous traditions. The records can then be reintegrated in the original archive next to the other objects of memory, or new Indigenous archives can be built in which the records will be re-created, re-captured, re-organised and re-pluralised by their custodians.

These two options can be plotted on Evelyn Wareham's spectrum for reconnecting Māori with the documentary record, "from reconnecting Māori with cultural information held in written records, to Māori reclaiming control over management of these resources, to calls for records' repatriation to their cultural owners".<sup>34</sup> The first option, Repurpose, can accommodate the processes associated with Māori reclaiming control over their cultural resources, whereas the second option, Repatriate, matches the end of Wareham's spectrum.

My intention in presenting this model at the ARANZ Conference in Rotorua in August 2018 was to propose it for discussion. I admit that there may be some elements that I have missed that are specific to Indigenous archives. These elements may appear only when we apply the analysis to specific archives. So far, it is only a theoretical model, but I see a potential for it to be used for advocacy purposes if it is used to highlight where the situation of Indigenous archives differs from that of other archives and where special processes need to be applied to them, and then to call for funding to cover the cost of these processes. I did not

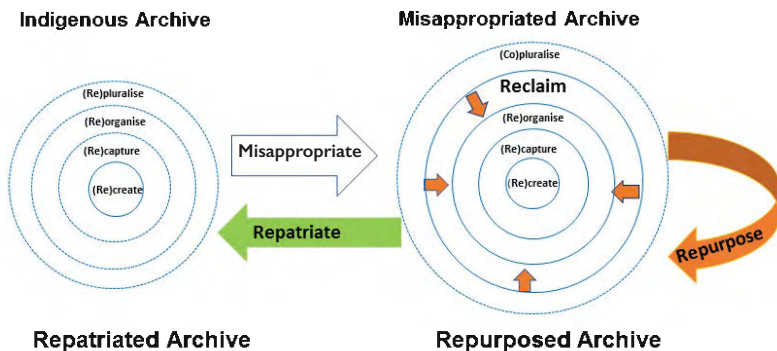


Figure 5. Continuum Model for Indigenous Archives

apply it to any specific case because I wanted to keep it at a high level and because I believe that applying it to specific Indigenous examples should be done by members of the communities affected.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress that I believe that the displacement and return of archives, or their (mis)appropriation, repurpose, repatriation and re-creation, are intellectual concepts. They do not necessarily refer to physical movements. An archive can be appropriated without being moved from its original location as was the case with the Tuol Sleng Archive discussed above.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, an archive could be returned to the community whose memories it documents without being physically moved if representatives from that community assumed control over it and chose to keep it in the same location. The cultural appropriation of Indigenous cultural artefacts that took place during the colonial and post-colonial period was not just a physical movement. It was the imposition of an imperialist worldview that re-contextualised the Indigenous cultural artefacts to make them appear as inferior to Western cultural artefacts. Therefore, decolonising the archives does not just involve a change of location or a change of actors, the archives must be returned to the Indigenous communities who will manage them in accordance with their cultural beliefs and traditions, and this means that the archives will need to be reappraised and redescribed (with new metadata elements), and that their access and their use must be rethought and renegotiated.<sup>37</sup>

## Endnotes

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  16. Frings-Hessami, "Looking at the Khmer Rouge archives".
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  34. *Ibid.*, 34.
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