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S. J. Angel
University of Wollongong, sangel@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

This article was originally published as Angel, S, Pretty Fly for a White Guy: Audio Repatriation to Arnhem Land, Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture, 6(3), December 2009.

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RESEARCH ONLINE

Pretty Fly for a White Guy: Audio Repatriation to Arnhem Land

Susan Angel

> [G]iven our condition as mortals, communication will always remain a problem of power, ethics, and art... John Durham Peters (1999)

Return to Arnhem Land broadcast on ABC Radio National's *Radio Eye* in 2007 is a significant and culturally important radio documentary. It charts the return of ancient song cycles, recorded in 1948 by ABC broadcaster and sound recordist Colin Simpson and technician Ray Giles, to the Oenpelli community in West Arnhem Land in 2006. It tells, through the eyes and voice of historian, broadcaster and narrator Martin Thomas, how these recordings came to be as he returns them to the community; and what the community makes of them as cultural records: artefacts of cultural heritage.

The documentary is stirring and evocative, a hybrid of historical account and personal narrative with shifts in time and place effectively woven together to create a seamless non-linear radio feature. No heavy handed historicism in sight, nor is there any modernist simplification of "truth" or "fidelity"(Sterne 2003). As audience we become witness to an audio event where the past and present seem to collide: ancient songs recorded on wire tape in 1948 are played back to the original descendants and we're privy to this mediated exchange. The return of the sacred/secret songs is declared an act of "cultural repatriation" and is described by the narrator/author as a step towards the Australian "post colonial project" (Thomas 2006).

But this documentary raises a number of questions about the construction of audio documentaries concerned with Indigenous cultural material, not least the role of the radio broadcaster and the anthropologist in capturing and reproducing what would one day be the voices of the dead. One might ask how the role of the historian, broadcaster and ultimately the narrator is played out, when questions of authenticity and the significance of "cultural repatriation" within the radio documentary form are raised. What are the underlying tensions, and why do they exist? What is the role of the author/narrator in this radio form? Does the narrator, in his role of returning sound from the past, replicate the role of the anthropologist from a century ago? If we're stepping into a discourse about cultural repatriation, we might query what are the parameters of this? Where does this discourse, like the ancients' songs, start and end? Who has provenance over such recordings? Indeed, what might be the ethical implications? As Peters (1999) reminds us, there are always those thorny questions surrounding who owns meaning:

> It is a question in which life and death hang in a mediated world. The question asks: Does nature speak, does god speak, does fate speak, do bureaucracies speak, or am I just making all of this up? Where do projections of myself end and where do authentic signals from the other begin? Can the object itself ever breathe through the veil (Peters 1999: 204)?

These questions go to the very heart of audio ethnographic histories and sound reproduction technologies. Following Peters, we might wonder what are the drivers behind the need to capture and entomb the voices of the dead? Can these voices ever speak through the veil of cultural silence, genocide and colonial intervention? And what are the implications if they do? May these voices – set free – even reanimate the past?

In this paper I analyse Thomas's *Return to Arnhem Land*, and the story behind this documentary: the Australian American Scientific expedition of 1948. It is worth noting this paper was written just prior to a significant conference on the Australian American Scientific Expedition, *Barks, Birds and Billabongs*, held at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, November 2009. Representatives from National Geographic, the Smithsonian and members of Australia's Indigenous community, as well as academics and anthropologists, attended and participated at this conference. Despite the currency and scale of this event, this paper is specifically concerned with the analysis of the radio broadcast stories and academic papers that Thomas has constructed from archival and research material from 2006 onwards. This analysis is contextualised within the frame of audio archival material, the history of sound recording and audio ethnography. I also examine Thomas's self-comparison with anthropologist, Eric Michaels. Finally, I examine some ethical and philosophical issues raised by Thomas's work here, placing this in conversation with the views of one ABC Indigenous broadcaster and features' maker Lorena Allam, on "cultural repatriation", and what has been coined, "the new anthropology".

The Background

I first listened to Thomas' *Return to Arnhem Land* in 2009 on podcast from ABC Radio National's *Radio Eye* program. I was overwhelmed by the nature and intimacy of the songs Thomas had auditioned, following on the groundbreaking work of documentary producer Tony MacGregor (2009) in the archives of the ABC. The songs used in both Simpson's original broadcast and Thomas's documentary were made at the Oenpelli community (now referred to as

Gunbalanya) in west Arnhem Land and recorded by Ray Giles and Colin Simpson in 1948. The ABC sent Simpson and Giles to record part of the Australian American Scientific expedition, including Indigenous songs and stories in their cultural settings. They used a Pyrox wire recorder. This new technology offered far greater portability than the preceding generation of extremely bulky field recording devices, and enabled ABC recordists to embark on many more field trips than previously (Thomas 2007).

These were arguably the first recordings to come from a remote Indigenous region of Australia and they figured in one of the first few documentaries on the ABC that used audio actuality, music, songs, language recorded in real time and real place. What Thomas auditioned in the vaults of the ABC – following MacGregor's discovery of the 1948 Simpson recordings (MacGregor 2009) – was this resonant audio material.

> I was struck by the beauty of the performances and the technical quality of the recordings, and that led me on a journey to find out about how they were made and what they mean to Aboriginal people today (Thomas ABC website 2007).

Some of these songs – incorporated in the documentary – are of secret/sacred traditional practices, some are no longer practised. On the trail of the Australian American Scientific expedition and the collections gathered from this, Thomas went to the Smithsonian in Washington as a research fellow, to later return to Arnhem Land. He used – with permission – what had been digitised from original wire tape and played this back to significant members of the Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) community where Colin Simpson and Ray Giles made their original recordings.

The Documentary

> To treat others as we would want to be treated means performing for them in such a way not that the self is authentically represented but that the other is caringly served… (Peters 1999: 269).

In *Return to Arnhem Land*, Thomas is a very present and engaging narrator who guides us on a sonic and elliptic tour of the Australian American Scientific expedition. Through the program, we peer into the camp and tents, "see" birds at dawn and "watch" as expedition leader, Australian anthropologist, C.P. Mountford, prepares the traditional owners and cultural vanguards for song (in a time and place of Mountford's choosing). In the original recordings and archival material, acts of cultural reconstruction, construction and anthropological piracy abound. Thomas gives us some examples but this critical discussion is preserved for his academic papers, rather than encountered in his radio documentary (egs.Thomas 2007a; Thomas 2007b; Thomas 2006; Thomas 2009).

Thomas also takes us inside Simpson's biographical divergences, along an audio ethnographical trajectory and down a cultural repatriation path. We are returned to the present where we meet Melbourne University linguist Murray Garde, for example, who works with Thomas to ensure the playback of the original tapes happens in a culturally sensitive way. Through this weaving and multi-layered story telling, we are given the chance to encounter sensorially – through the songs, through the sound of the voices and the effect of the songs and voices on our bodies – the unique cultural geography of the region. As Thomas notes:

> The layering of histories that give places their meaning is especially pronounced at Kabulwarnamayo, an outstation on the Arnhem Land Plateau. (Thomas 2007).

Return to Arnhem Land is about the layering of these histories: Mountford's; Simpson's; the Indigenous performers' from the Oenpelli community, also Thomas' own account. The stories are layered and plotted onto an auditory landscape. It's an audio palimpsest. While one strand of the documentary is about cultural repatriation – the recordings of Aboriginal people being returned and re-embraced as cultural heritage in communities – it's also about the importance and value of archival sound as media heritage, and the international interest in these new cultural excavations. Other strands of the documentary are concerned with the colonial past and the colonial present and the collapse of time into a mediated audio experience. Inevitably, perhaps, it becomes as much about the narrator as the story.

What then might be the ethical and philosophical issues at stake here? And why should we be concerned? Thomas himself raises these questions as narrator in his documentary. Here is what he has to say almost as an introduction to the journey we will take with him over some 45 minutes:

> How did these recordings come about and what do they mean? There are people who dismiss these things in terms of cultural piracy and as appropriation of Indigenous culture. As I discovered in 2006 Arnhem Landers regard these film, photos and recordings differently: they see these as part of their own cultural heritage. I visited Arnhem Land to discuss the recordings and other material with traditional owners to see what story they prompt… I'm not alone in doing this…It's part of a broader trend…findings of researchers being returned to the community that spawned them. Repatriation is the term. And for me as an historian there is a political aspect to this work, a feeling that some practical approach is needed when dealing with the legacy of racism and empire. My access to things in archives can broker connections between people and their heritage; and again digitisation shapes the process not only because it makes for nice recordings but because of its power of compression –

> almost a truckload of material can be loaded onto CDs and taken to one of the most remote communities in the country (Thomas & ABC Radio 2007).

The 1948 Australian American Scientific Expedition

This now famous expedition was the dream-child of the self-taught Australian ethnographer and anthropologist, Charles P. Mountford (1890-1976). According to Thomas (2008), the joint Australian-American expedition was a major cultural event in the immediate post World War II period, involving seventeen American scientists who moved between three main bases over a seven month period in 1948, studying both the natural environment, and the Aboriginal people they met along the way. C.P Mountford had the support of the Smithsonian Institute and National Geographic Society in the USA, and the Commonwealth Department of Information in Australia. According to Thomas, the expedition broke new ground in the collection of images, photographic sound and film (Thomas 2008): thirteen thousand botanical specimens, tens of thousands of animal and bird specimens, 500 bark paintings, thousands of weapons and implements, thousands of photographs and five miles of film. All of this material was used for bolstering "collections" for museums in Australia and the USA. When Thomas secured a fellowship with the Smithsonian in Washington DC, he was allowed to investigate the original expedition, uncovering as a result uncovered diaries, photos and other significant cultural material amongst a raft of paintings, bones, textiles and tools (Thomas 2008).

Then, after spending many months painstakingly going through the Smithsonian collections from an expedition few historians have been privy to, Thomas returned to Arnhem Land (on invitation from a senior Indigenous law man) with images, film and recordings taken from this institution in addition to recordings unearthed from the ABC's sound archives. He also worked in close collaboration with linguist and translator, Murray Garde, currently an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. Along with those recordings of Colin Simpson, the cultural material came to be regarded by the Indigenous community in Gunbalanya not so much as stolen objects, but as part of their media and cultural heritage:

> Every day we convened discussion sessions which we recorded. Some involved men only; others included men, women and children. It all depended on the content of the material. While the audience gathered cross-leg on the ground, we cued the iTune or DVD file on a lap top computer and pressed the ludic button on the virtual console-PLAY (Thomas 2008).

Thomas talks about this process at length not only in the radio documentary but also in an academic paper titled, "'If we don't see this film again, we won't be able to remember': Taking documentary records to Arnhem Land" (Thomas: 2006).

Modernity & inevitable discrepancies in the radio documentary form

In his papers about the expedition, Thomas is critical of the ways in which early anthropologists viewed and represented their Indigenous subjects. He praises Mountford nevertheless for humanising his "subjects", even while pointing out Mountford's most obvious flaw:

> Mountford's sensitive photographic portraiture did much to humanise Aboriginal people in popular imagery but in his lectures and writings he regularly exploited the trope of extreme primitiveness (Thomas 2007).

Going through archival material and also the diaries and journals of both the Australian and American scientists, Thomas discovers the scientists' frequent disappointment that the "natives" weren't quite as "primitive" as they had expected or hoped they would be. Thomas uses the diary of anthropologist Frederick D McCarthy to illustrate the point:

> That unfortunately the natives are almost completely civilised, speaking English well and have dropped their ceremonial hunting life... (Thomas 2007).

Not only does Thomas explore this aspect in detail, he also comments upon the direct intervention by Mountford and others on this expedition. For example, Thomas encounters the diaries of Brian Billington, medical researcher and expedition doctor who, in describing the filming of a ceremony on Groote Island, unmasks Mountford's theatrical tendencies. Thomas includes this entry (found at the National Archives of Australia, Records of the Institute of Anatomy: *Billington to Clements* No. A2644) in his scholarly writing: "[T]o create the impression of nakedness without compromising the films suitability for general viewing, C.P Mountford persuaded the performers to wear loin cloths he had specifically blackened in ink. 'Ha Ha, wrote Billington. Hollywood has nothing on CPM'. (Charles Mountford)'" (Thomas 2007: 25). Mountford, Thomas argues, established a field of performance where the scientists too became actors:

> As the Americans and Australians enacted the business of science, the locals were encouraged to disrobe and enact their "primitive" culture. The expedition seems to have received a high level of co-operation in producing these customised displays of traditional life (Thomas 2007).

Thomas also discovers some of the material he unearthed doesn't belong to the Indigenous people of Oenpelli (Thomas 2008). After being reviewed by an archaeologist, some of the footage shown to the present day community is now believed to be from the Kimberley and *not* the Arnhem Land region at all (Thomas 2007a; Thomas 2006a).

> Why it ended up in the reels of unedited Arnhem Land footage is uncertain, but it is possible that Mountford used the film in lectures to accompany his spiel about "stone age" Arnhem Land…Here is a reminder that the documentary image has a genie-like propensity to escape the thinking that led to its conception" (Thomas 2006).

The modernist presumption of Indigenous cultures being primitive and "other" is vigorously challenged by Thomas throughout his academic writing. But, it's a selective challenge in terms of his diverse audiences, and is not apparent in the radio documentary. There is no mention of the example above (of Mountford using images of The Kimberleys in his talks on Arnhem Land) and herein lies a "disconnect" between the critical/anthropological writing and the broadcaster's narrative. A sense of discrepancy between the known and unknown and what should be revealed and what should be excluded; between the medium of published (historical) academic work and "published" radio documentary as "historical research", emerges on a number of occasions. While Thomas in his academic papers discusses and acknowledges Western scientific intervention – what this intervention means in the context of Indigenous cultural material – this is rarely dealt with in the documentary, at least not in any reflexive or critical way, other than to say: this is what the community wants/wanted and, "I'm doing what others have done" (Thomas: *Return to Arnhem Land* 2007).

This is also the case with Thomas's examination of the earlier (ABC) documentary and its maker Colin Simpson. Simpson appears as "hero" of his own "story". While quick to analyse and critique these recordings in his academic papers (and also Simpson's groundbreaking published work, *Adam In Ochre* (1951)*)*, Thomas doesn't extend this critical discussion further to the radio programs.

In his academic writing again, Thomas reveals how Simpson worked closely with the Indigenous performers he encountered to re-record when they wish to: "[T]he white people of Australia would not hear him make a wrong note on the didgeridoo". Simpson also happily obliges with the requests of the performers; and Thomas even documents the exchange of tobacco in return for the Indigenous performers' assistance in making his recordings (2007a: 28). However, Simpson's intervention in actual corroborees (documented by Thomas in his papers, not in the doco) is the stuff of bizarre interventionism.

> Simpson makes an appearance in the film *Wubarr*, and since this is not a matter of ceremony, but rather a distraction from it, there is no hindrance to describing the scene. The dance and song are going on in all their glory when the apparent purity of the ethnographic moment is disrupted – and yet paradoxically affirmed – by the pale Colin Simpson, pith helmeted and wearing shorter-than-short shorts, leaping into the frame with a microphone (Thomas 2008).

Once more we are not offered this picture in the documentary, yet it is an important one: the documentary maker as interventionist/constructionist. These omissions might be disturbing if it weren't for an acknowledgement that radio documentaries, by necessity, are restricted due to genre and the inevitable dictates of time. Time is of the essence in radio, as other time-based media, and there is a great deal of material to get through.

We might observe too that it is the vocal presence of the narrator giving the work its sense of authenticity and credibility. In *Return…,* Thomas acts as a kind of "medium" allowing the story to flow, connecting disparate elements: past, present, the Australian American Scientific expedition…as the 1948 recordings of indigenous corroboree and secret/sacred practices are knitted together in a sonorous weave. It is Thomas's voice that connects us to this Aboriginal community and to its (and our) colonial past. In this way the author-narrator acts as a conduit for the voices of the past as he returns them to the Oenpelli community transformed in the present.

The presence of the narrator here, however, could also be seen to allow "the hero" (as Simpson or Thomas) to slip through without criticism or reflection. Through Thomas's narrating voice, we are privy to aspects of Simpson's diary recordings (in vocal re-enactment of sections of his autobiography in the documentary) and where Simpson has an "epiphany" that leads to changes in attitude, or his perspectives and ideas about Indigenous Australians – although no self-reflexivity is evident from Simpson regarding his direct interventionism (at least not in the radio doc). While Thomas illuminates this clearly in his academic papers, the role of the broadcaster as hero in the documentary remains un- or under-examined.

While Thomas's presence in the radio documentary is ubiquitous, we get far more accurate and astute historical and critical detail in the academic papers where the role of the linguist and observer is acutely drawn and described within ontological and epistemological contexts. Is this simply a result of and reality of the medium? For the listener, seduced by a somewhat reassuring narrating presence, there is the distinct possibility they may perceive this documentary journey as a triumph of the role of the broadcaster, Thomas, in taking cultural material "home". The radio documentary can then be read as a triumph over the past, a heroic act that does much to resolve past tensions and indeed past theft: an act of reconciliation.

But without the additional knowledge Thomas divulges in his scholarly publications – the exploration of a kind of interventionism Thomas undertakes– we are not easily in a position, as listeners, to critique the role of Simpson as heroic adventurer or storyteller. Consequently we cannot really examine his repeated instances of interventionism in any depth. As already suggested, he might even appear ideologically free; and both the radio documentaries (2009 and 1949), suggest Simpson is transformed by the experience of recording with Ray Giles in the west Arnhem Land region. The radio documentary in this instance becomes favourable to the narrator and former broadcaster's unintentional mythmaking. Thomas reveals an awareness of this, nevertheless, noting in his paper:

> The long history of researchers concealing their interventionism points to the sometimes uneasy interface between investigative ontology of westeners determined to objectify and display the inner workings of the world, and a secret -sacred ontology which by definition is predicated on the restriction of knowledge (Thomas 2007).

Does the intrinsic nature of the genre (radio documentary) and the time demands of the medium (radio) necessarily lead Thomas or Simpson to a more critically reflexive perspective being precluded? Thomas's presence in the documentary, his "taking back" can be perceived as a form of interventionism – one that, while making amends, still might be viewed as a player in the story of western interventionism. His act of return, although intended to "caringly serve" the other (as we have heard from J.D. Peters) still masks in the action the place of the "authentic self" (recalling Peters again, Ibid1999). This act of return bestows kudos on the non-Indigenous as the "hero" just as the acquisition of bones, recordings, images and other cultural material bestowed in the past a kind of kudos on those involved in the "historic" Australian American Scientific expedition. According to ABC Radio National Indigenous broadcaster, Lorena Allam, however, the act of cultural repatriation, the focus and centre point of Thomas's documentary, reveals a weakness:

> It's still the native as subject. It really is that and the cynical side of me says well, it's about the white explorer all over again, you've just got a different form of terminology but it is really about the white man going to Arnhem Land. This gets back to the point: we have enough knowledge and we have enough sophistication these days to be questioning that all along the way. It should be a really fundamental part of the journey and, in fact, I think that would make an interesting radio narrative: the producer's questioning of their own motivations as they make the program. I think that would be really honest and it would be something I'd really want to listen to (Allam 2009).

Interventionism isn't the only problematic area of Thomas's programs. He is also concerned with the reaction to the playing of secret/sacred material back to the Aboriginal community, and the use of possibly secret material in the documentary.

Secret Sacred

> Communication, again, is more basically a political and ethical problem than a semantic or psychological one. As such thinkers as Hegel, Marx, Dewey, Mead, Adorno and Habermas all argue, just communication is an index of the good society. We ought to be worried less about how signs arouse divergent meanings than the conditions that keep us from attending to our neighbours and other beings different from us (Peters 1999: 269).

Thomas's repatriation of the digitised 1948 audio recordings to Arnhem Land was and remains a complex matter. On Thomas's side, it was clearly done on invitation, and in good faith, as it was senior law man and elder Lofty Bardayal[1] who made the request to Thomas to return the recorded stories and sounds. However, as Thomas himself admits, some of the secret/sacred material form the original documentary by Simpson: the corroborees, the songs taken by Mountford's team… still reveal material, "unspeakably offensive" to the people (Thomas: 2008). For Thomas the challenge in the "Return" was to, "get documentation to the rightful owners and let it sit in its proper cultural context"(Ibid). Much to his credit this is exactly what Thomas succeeds in doing. At every step he records the process and at every step there is the full participation and involvement of the community. This involvement is fleshed out in "Taking Them Back…" (Thomas 2008).

Thomas also acknowledges the protocols concerning secret/sacred Indigenous cultural material. It is Australian media policy too for disclaimers to be used when showing images of Indigenous people who are deceased or when playing the sound of the deceased speaking or singing. Amongst many Indigenous communities there is a deeply held cultural practice *not* to play or show images/voices of the dead; to do so will be to awaken or unsettle the dead.[2] Yet, when Thomas shows the images and plays the copied recordings, he notes it's the first time the footage has been seen in Arnhem Land, and the community embrace it.

In returning the doco material Thomas finds the Arnhem Landers thinking differently to what is expected of them. In a perhaps unorthodox reaction, they regard the photos and recordings as a valuable part of their cultural heritage.

> I visited Arnhem Land to discuss the recordings and other material with traditional owners to see what story they prompt…I'm not alone in doing this…[I]t's part of a broader trend…The finding of researchers being returned to the community that spawned them. Repatriation is the term… (Thomas ABC radio 2007).

What Thomas thinks is at first to be an across the board restriction, isn't quite so in practice. According to linguist Murray Garde, the apparent orthodoxy of restricting access changes over time and from region to region. After a significant passage of time the restriction can even break down. Also only senior law-makers in any given area can make these decisions thus the idea of a blanket prohibition is an oversimplification. Thomas's final note in his paper, *Taking them back* (2008), appears as a reminder to himself:

> By averting from the secret, and attending instead to the cultural interface, we can think in a qualitative way about the things that can be said, and those that cannot...that is to say, we might think about the sorts of knowledge that are truly desirable; the kinds of exposition that are necessary if the world is to become truly post colonial.

The recordings and images – the historical material – stay with the community and indeed, are granted new life. (Murray Garde has been instrumental in establishing a local archive the community now administers).

A Brief History Of Audio Ethnography And The Cultural Study Of Sound

The bourgeois modernity of sound recording is polyrhythmic: it becomes an interplay of telos and cycles shaped by the physical possibilities and limits of materials; it moves between the ephemerality of moments and the possibility of an eternal persistence (Sterne 2003).
Johnathon Sterne contextualises the trend of western countries rushing to record Indigenous languages as a possible "marbling" or "bronzing". This was the case of Native Americans where ethnographer and anthropologists in the late 19th century were accused of, "freezing a dynamic culture at a single moment in time for future study" (Sterne 2003: 319). Once the voice is recorded it is no longer coming from a body: recorded voices are, in Sterne's language "a resonant tomb, offering the exteriority of the voice with none of its interior self-awareness" (Sterne 2003). Yet, the release of the ethnographic recordings Tony McGregor discovered in the ABC archival tomb and Martin Thomas returned to the Oenpelli/Gunbalanya community in west Arnhem Land, may have brought back to the community, a living connection to its past.
From the beginning sound reproduction had great possibilities as an archival medium. Sterne suggests (Sterne 2003: 289) the voices of the dead were everywhere in writings about sound recording in the late 19th and early 20th century.

> Recording voices: songs and speech were a way of preserving the dead and simultaneously freeing the voice from the body. Death explains and shapes the "cultural power of sound recording" (Sterne 2003: 291)

"The practical and imagined possibilities of recordings permanence existed as part of a longer history a larger culture of preservation" (Ibid 2003). The culture of preservation, began with canning (preservation) of food, an afterthought to the industrial revolution and, a precursor to embalming. The preservation of the dead is thus an extension of the emerging culture of preservation. (Sterne 2003: 292) "...as with sound technology, preservation technology did not have an autonomous cultural life." Canned food, he maintains, was an early artefact of an emerging consumer culture. Recording, too, was the product of a culture that had learned to can and to embalm, to preserve the bodies of the dead so they could continue to perform a social function after life" (Sterne 2003: 290). This sensibility, Sterne says was built into the recording technology and the medium itself. Death, then, laid the "foundation for the trope of the voices of the dead"(Ibid).

American and Australian anthropologists/ethnographers justified the use of early sound recording technologies as a means of preserving dying cultures. This ethos of preservation was also inherent in the work of anthropologist turned ethnographer, Norma B. Tindale (Thomas 2007).

The trope of the voices of the dead had a significant impact on the provision of the audio archive both in Australia, Europe and the Americas:

> "We must preserve the voices of dying cultures so that we have them (linear-historical time); we must then preserve the recordings themselves so that we can keep them (geologic time) so that we may break them down and study them at our leisure (fragmented time). (Sterne 2003: 330).

Recording: anthropologists and ethnographers in the colonial "new" world

Sterne examined the study of native American culture during the 19th and 20th century by American anthropologists and found the early anthropologists saw their subjects as existing in a different temporal zone and this, in itself, was a measure of cultural difference. Sterne found that anthropologists' conception of modernity followed two trains of thought: that cultures outside anthropologists own were representative of a collective past, and, also that *time* represented a temporal slope for all cultures faced with the "immutable force of modernity" (Sterne 2004: 311):

> This denial of coeval existence – that is coexistence at the same historical moment – results in a relentless 'othering' where anthropologists construct themselves as living in a society that is more developed or advanced than the societies that they study; it is a form of primitivism (Ibid).

What happened in North and South America and Canada and, in fact, most Indigenous first-nations in the world, was in perfect parallel with Australia's Indigenous population who, from the date of colonial settlement, were forcibly removed to settlements. The emphasis in the late 19th and early 20th century in the Americas and in Australia was on the policy of assimilation - this required the Indigenous to abandon their lands, religion and cultural values. While

more sympathetic anthropological values allowed for the acceptance of native American and Australian Indigenous cultures and as the concept of culture evolved anthropologists were still very influenced by Darwin's origin of the species, and the immutable forces of modernity: a misplaced modernity (Sterne 2003: 315). Thus, the early ethnographic recording of Indigenous Australians and native Americans marked a sense of: "impending loss and the imperative of preservation as well as a hope for their future use" (Sterne 2003: 315).

Entering the world of the dead and leaving their bones intact…

> There's a lot of history in this country. Information technology, recording technology brings a new form of archaeology – we can enter the world of the dead and leave their bones in peace… (Martin Thomas ABC radio: *This is Jimmy Barker*).

The colonial race to record from post World War II brought sounds of Aboriginal Australia to white Australia. Martin Thomas documents this history extensively in *The rush to record: transmitting the sound of Aboriginal Australia* (Thomas 2007). Thomas documents Norma B. Tindale (ibid), instrumental in forming the South Australian Museum, playing the recordings of Fanny Cochran Smith made by the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1899, on the ABC when appearing as a guest in 1949. These are considered the oldest recordings of an Indigenous voice in Australia (Thomas 2007: 110).

Like Fewkes[3] in North America, Tindale "positioned the superseded technology as a signifier of racial termination and cultural exhaustion" (in Ibid). This in turn stripped the songs of their semantic value. Airplay, later, illuminated the concept of: "a race of people officially extinct" (Thomas 2007). Tindales' interpretation, he says, followed closely not just the culturally dominant attitudes to race but also attitudes to recording: "All mimetic technologies, those 19th century inventions that purport to reproduce 'the real' are haunted by intimations of loss and disappearance." (Thomas 2007). Simpson's recordings in Arnhem Land in 1948, and his later biographical writings, signified an attitudinal shift: Simpson was critical of the process of recording "racial death", stresses Thomas (Ibid).[4] "Simpson's writings and recordings", Thomas says, "provide a counterpoint to Tindale's broadcast, which sits snugly within established constructions of racial demise…We can't situate these recordings", he says in "either a straight forward narrative of colonial plunder and exhibition" (Thomas 2007).

Thomas thus discovers, in his critique of Simpson's recordings and documentary sound-scapes a "push to encourage Australians to experience their land and heritage more authentically" (Thomas 2007: 116).

The role of the narrator

> [H]ere was a new, technologically mediated partiality that injected a different, and I would say, a more emotionally charged sense of affect into the ongoing project of representing Australia. Part of this shift involved a greater degree of first-person narrative in the reporting … (Thomas 2007).

Simpson, he says, situated himself firmly in his recordings as narrator using this first-person technique. He drew the audience into the place by announcing where he was – in the suspended, mediated moment – and what he was witnessing. His presence, in the field, told the audience he was an authentic and credible witness. He was there and it was happening, *now*. Simpson, however, doesn't deconstruct the moment for us, as Thomas can and does. He can only interpolate the moment within the context of colonialism and modernism. He may be situated slightly outside this frame and he may come to challenge it later in his book, *Adam in Ochre*; but for now, his is very much at the mercy of his subjectivity: his limited understanding of this point in history. The way one culture tries to imitate another, Thomas concludes, is another form of power dynamic which inevitably favours the Westerner over the primitive; the modern over the ancient (Thomas 2007). First person narration in this context then, lends us an insight: one constrained by the contingencies and drivers of the time.

A far more significant and autonomous contribution to Indigenous ethnography comes from Murrawarri man, Jimmy Barker. His extraordinary recordings of himself, his experiences and his people are documented by Thomas in two award- winning feature radio documentaries.[5] These ground-breaking first-person recordings produced by Thomas are from the tapes of self-taught ethnographer, Jimmy Barker, who recorded himself over a number of years firstly with his own wax cylinders and later with the tapes that ethnographer Janet Mathews gave in exchange (for the tapes).Barker records Murrawarri language, Indigenous culture and his life and times growing up first on the banks of a river in northern NSW with a Murrawarri tribe and later on farms and in nearby townships.

This is Jimmy Barker and, *I love you Jimmy (*Radio Eye 2001)[6] offer a double narration: the narrator is Jimmy Barker *and* Martin Thomas. Thomas tells the story of how he found the tapes as he travels with Barker's family back to Jimmy's birthplace. The recorded voice of Barker is aware, knowledgeable, dynamic and insistent. This is his voice, these are his thoughts; this is his project. Here the other narrator, the producer, Thomas, is present – but only just; instead the story is left to Jimmy (with the help of the editor/producer: a production intervention). A second/third story unwinds through the narration of a younger generation: Jimmy's grandchildren return to the land of their grandfather to explore the legacy of these recordings. Here the narrator/historian works with the family to free the voice from the past (and the archives) providing a living/present context.

Bringing them back: the aftermath

In *Return to Arnhem Land*, there is no doubt about the significance and importance of the stories around the Australian American Scientific expedition and the recorded songs found in the ABC archives, and the role of Colin Simpson. The archival material – recordings, diaries, all acknowledge the cultural past and they are having a

profound impact on the epistemological present. They give many a sense of continuity with their own traditional ancestry just as the Native Americans' ethnographic recordings made in the field and in studio recordings were greeted with excitement and reverence. As with the Native Americans this rediscovery is a way to "reanimate forgotten tribal knowledge and spur the reinvigoration of living traditions" (Sterne 2003: 331).

When Thomas returned the archived sound on the request of Lofty Bardayal the recordings were met in a similar way. They were perceived not as living cultural artefacts, but ones that could became part of the community:

> The Arnhem Landers discerned clear possibilities for deploying this material within their own knowledge systems...Senior Bininj. Thomson Yulidjiri: 'And this Wubarr ceremony. We want to show it to the young men, to introduce it to them (through the film). It belongs to us. And here. It should come and 'sit down' here...You tell them this' (Thomas 2007).

Another, Jacob Nayinggul, tells Thomas:

> I would love it very much (to have a copy of an edited version). I would like to hold in to it. Myself and the other senior men here we would share it together and watch it together...If we don't see this film again we won't be able to remember. Maybe all we would have is a name. The film, and those old people...The Wubarr ceremony has come alive again in those images they made...(Thomas 2007).

In his paper for the Australian Museum, (Thomas 2008: 8-11)."In the wake of the Arnhem land Expedition" Thomas gives another perspective of the handing back of the material which in many respects is more a "viewing" than a handing back:

> The Museum fellowship funded me to visit Arnhem Land when I interviewed key knowledge holders... [I]nterest in the collections and documentation could not be stronger. To find out about people's current understandings of the Museum's collections, it was necessary to draw upon the multimedia quality of the expedition itself. I went to Arnhem Land with a laptop computer laden with digital images of artefacts and extracts from film...Thus equipped I gave senior knowledge holders virtual tours of the Museum collections...These sessions were videoed and recorded so that contemporary perspectives on the historic collections could be added to the Museum database (Ibid).

Cultural Repatriation and Eric Michaels

> The term, cultural repatriation, means that cultural material is returned. It recognises that the ownership of that material belongs to the community/people/descendants of those who originated it. In the case of human remains, the material is handed over permanently in the knowledge that it becomes the property of the receivers, and is theirs to use, reproduce or dispose of as they see fit. The act of returning is an act of apology, an acknowledgement that this material was unethically gathered in the first place. Repatriation is an attempt to make this right, to counterbalance the mistakes of history. Researchers and academics should uncover and share cultural material as good ethical practice. Lorena Allam, Broadcaster ABC radio National (2009).

Martin Thomas makes numerous mentions and comparisons to Eric Michaels in his papers on Arnhem Land. The celebrated Canadian anthropologist Eric Michaels worked with Warlpiri in Yuendumu on video technology, and Thomas makes a telling comparison.

> Much has been said about the readiness of Aboriginal people to take control of Western media and use it for their own purposes, given the opportunity. I think immediately of Eric Michaels' remarkable study of Warlpiri video and television in central Australia in the 1980s...Needless to say, the scientists who witnessed the performance of ceremony in 1948 did not perceive their ethnographic subjects as media players...(Thomas 2007: 33).

In the same article he goes on encourage a "greater recognition of the continuing history of Aboriginal engagements with modernity – a theme raised by Eric Michaels ..." (Thomas 2007: 36). He continues: "When Aboriginal people are recognised as shaper of modernity, we who study these things might query the long anthropological tradition of seeking x-ray perspectives on secret lives." (Ibid) In the introduction to the paper; "If we don't see this film again..." Thomas goes further:

> In 2006, inspired by Eric Michaels' study of how TV and video are conceptualised in Aboriginal communities, I took copies of 1948 films, recordings and photographs to the three areas of Arnhem

> Land visited by the expedition..."

Michaels spent many years in the central desert working with Warlpiri in developing a cohesive local media unit and, "comprehensive and legal protocols and ethics around filming (for outsiders)" (Hickson 1996). Michaels challenged and reversed perceptions of Indigenous interaction with video and television media in his groundbreaking monograph: *The Aboriginal Invention of Television*. The title alone contests indigenous passivity to technology and what this meant culturally: "Michaels title: 'the Aboriginal invention of Television' polemically refuses this construction (as reeling under yet another death-blow) by inverting its terms" (Hodge 1990).

Michaels assisted local Indigenous leaders in the development of a Warlpiri media centre which focused around the twin Warlpiri needs of positive representation and firm boundaries around private cultural and family matters: what outsiders could and couldn't access (Hickson 1996). Also, Michaels worked within the "skin"-linked information circles, and the ontological processes against external, government bureaucracy that frequently foisted inappropriate policy on the community. His work around media policy, assisted strategy and framework development for other remote media organisations around the country, is greatly acknowledged. Hickson in a visit to Yuendumu in the mid 90's noted: [T]he sophisticated understanding the Yappa (Warlpiri) have of the way in which the media operate and more generally the process of recording and publishing /broadcasting Warlpiri cultural knowledge..." owed much, she believed to Michaels (Hickson 1996). Michaels developed "control mechanisms protecting and providing for a cultural future in which Yappa – Yappa refers to Warlipiri people, Kardiya to white people – would "negotiate the extent to which they wished to engage in the global society through 'inventing' their own media practices..." (Hickson 1996).

Michaels' scholarly work dealing with the impact of video and television on Indigenous cultures was achieved through his analysis of language, knowledge and discourse: "the ways in which white, imperial cultures control and attempt to dominate other societies" (Burnett 1990:1). Michaels also made a clean break from a predominately structuralist analysis of media impacts and effects, in this way developing a relativistic approach concerned with power and its maintenance, or power and its negotiation (Hodge 1990), a discourse analysis favoured by academic Stephen Muecke (Muecke: 2005). But, even Michaels isn't spared the accusation of "Aboriginalism" (Hodge 1990). Hodge claims the discourse of Aboriginalism, analogical to Edward Said's concept of orientalism, is inherent in Michaels' work in the 1980's:

> [H]is wry critique of Bruce Chatwin's more extreme form of para-ethnology distances himself from Chatwin's practices but not from the impulses that drive it" (Ibid).

Hodge states "the ghostly survival of Aboriginalism" (Ibid) exists in the intrinsic nature of Michaels' work: the motivation inherent in doing the work and the fact that it can almost be free from inspection and critique. This may be a charge that can be levelled at Thomas in *Return to Arnhem Land.* The very nature of the journey to "take back" may be similar to the anthropologists' journey to observe. His motivations, certainly his methodology, when presenting the material to the Oenpelli/Gunbalanya community and recording their reaction to the ancient songs, appear scientific, anthropological and often voyeuristic. He is part of the making; he is intervening and at the same time unveiling – but for whom?

What we might say, as is suggested by others, is that while Michaels might have contributed to the discourses of Aboriginalism, he also enabled his Indigenous co-workers and colleagues to make a firm break from the kinds of paternalistic practices that surrounded Yappa's engagement with media practices. And it was his ongoing presence, his continual engagement with the community, which was political and empowering.

Where Michaels and Thomas have a strong similarity is in their critique of secret sacred material. Both theorists reject the *static* nature of secret sacred ontological practices: the strict controls of taboos around who can know, speak and hear various material – as never changing – the perceived wisdom in traditional anthropology: "timeless patterns of knowledge that can only degenerate from their pristine form without any recognition that they are always only constituted through discourse and can always be reconstituted in the same way" (Hodge 1990).

Thomas also takes instruction from the Aboriginal community translated by Murray Garde, who tells him the material can be viewed now – circulated. He describes the project as useful:

> Quite apart from the opportunity of learning about the pace of media heritage in contemporary Aboriginal culture, it is important to document community attitudes about what can be made public, and what is restricted. Such information is beneficial to those who manage the archives, and it also helps in overcoming certain half-baked notions about Aboriginal attitudes to naming or depicting deceased persons..." (Thomas 2006).

A contemporary Indigenous perspective: ABC broadcaster Lorena Allam

Radio documentary maker Lorena Allam (also award winning) believes the only way the anthropologist/historian can call research "cultural repatriation" is when they hand over the ownership of the material, and when they remain an active participant in knowledge transfer with the community. She believes critical and continuous evaluation and negotiation of the term "cultural repatriation" must take place in academia:

> [R]esearchers these days need to check themselves to use a common phrase, to make sure they're

> not repeating the same behaviours that were made in the first place that they are the authority… (They're) just creating a space for authority in a new way - unless you're prepared to do the kind of consultative work with the community that shares the power: that shares the information- that benefits them (Allam).

Part of the problem, she believes also lies in the personal dynamic role of the narrator in radio documentaries of and about Indigenous people:

> That's one of the problems with radio: you need a narrator. The form requires a narrator, so you are placing yourself in the story and there's all sorts of problems with that – that tends to replicate the behaviours that were done in the past (Allam 2009).

Producers, she feels, should be questioning their role and motivation throughout the program to deflect charges of "Aboriginalism."

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Thomas radio documentary work is a critically important contribution to Australian ethnography and also to broadcasting, particularly with the *Jimmy Barker* documentaries and also with *Return to Arnhem Land*. The detailed historical revisiting of the Australian American Scientific expedition, the critical exploration and evaluation of the recordings of Colin Simpson and sound recordist, Ray Giles, and his documentation of audio ethnography in Australia reveal a personal and intellectual commitment to not just "history" but to the post colonial project.

Whether or not Thomas needed to record the reactions of the Oenpelli community to the 50-odd-year-old recordings is a matter of conjecture. Perhaps, in the end, the need for that final "x-ray perspective" on lives no longer perceived as primitive or "other" is necessary or, perhaps it's simply a continuation of a long anthropological tradition. Handing back the recordings to the appropriate people may have been all that was warranted. Notwithstanding these criticisms, Thomas' work with archived audio is unique and valuable, particularly in terms of making available to the listening public and researchers, sound that extends our knowledge and understanding of the history of this country (the collective consciousness: the collective memory). However, to think that in the act of "repatriation" we make amends for colonial practices of the past is possibly to limit a critical engagement still in the offing through this material.

The voices from behind the veil speak once more and there is continuity: the voices bring an Indigenous cultural past to the present and in so doing reanimate the culture for both the elders and for those of future generations. Communities can re-incorporate these stories and song cycles and traditions into their cultural present. As the tomb of archival sound is prised open – like Pandora's box – for academic inquiry, questions of ownership, ethics and knowledge should continue to be vigorously examined and contested.

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1 Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek. Indigenous Elder and esteemed visual artist. Born 1926, he died October 2009. See also Anita Heiss, Australian Copyright vs Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights: a discussion paper, Indigenous Portfolio, The Australian Society of Authors:
http://www.asauthors.org/lib/ASA_Papers/ASA_Australian_Copyright_vs_Indigenous_Intellectual.pdf

2 *Return to Arnhem Land* cannot be podcast at the moment due to death in the community. The ABC Radio Eye website: "Due to cultural consideration this program is not available as a download. One of the Indigenous interviewees passed away and we are currently in the two year mourning period in which his name cannot be spoken and his voice cannot be heard".

3 Fewkes was a Harvard trained zoologist who began recording native Americans - the Passamaquoddy and Zuni music and speech - in the late 19th century from about 1890.

4 Thomas's documentation in**:** *The rush to record: transmitting the sound of Aboriginal cultur***e** is another significant academic contribution to the history of sound recording and audio ethnography. The historic detail is an important contribution. This paper also examines the role of Simpson, and the discovery of Simpson's work by ABC producer, Tony McGregor.

5 See *This is Jimmy Barker*: (NSW History awards, 2000): **www.arts.nsw.gov.au/awards/HistoryAwards/2000Hist/2000hist.htm** "Born in 1900, Jimmie Barker grew up in Murawari country where he learnt to speak his tribal language. When he was twelve years old his family were relocated, in line with Government policy, to a mission station in Brewarrina. This act of dispossession was the beginning of the end for Barker's tribe and their ancient language, Murawari. *I love you Jimmie* – A sequel to *This is Jimmie Barker* based on Barker's description of his first romance during the period of World War I (duration 54 minutes). Broadcast on Radio Eye, ABC Radio National, 6 October 2001.

6 *This is Jimmie Barker* - A radio documentary about sound recording in an Aboriginal context (duration 56 minutes). Broadcast on Radio Eye, ABC Radio National on 25 March 2000. Repeated 19 November, 2000. Winner of the NSW Premier's Audio/Visual History Prize, 2000 and (with *I love you Jimmie*) joint winner of the inaugural Best Moving Portrait Documentary Award, 2003.

7 See Lorena Allam profile: hindsight **http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/about/**

Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney