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Berlin's Australian Archive: reframing nature as cultural belonging

Acknowledgement

The authors respectfully acknowledge that the natural history collections discussed in this paper include animal bodies, ancestral belongings and records of language and cultural practices from many First Peoples groups along the Millu/Dhungala/central Murray River and Baarka/lower Darling River. We pay respect to the Traditional Custodians. We particularly acknowledge the Nyeri Nyeri, Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa and Wamba Wemba Peoples and recognise that these collections are not simply scientific specimens, but remain connected to living cultures, communities and Country.

Introduction

Our work on the 1856–1857 Murray River expedition began from First Peoples' insistence that natural history collections are never 'just' nature, and that cultural collections are never 'just' culture. Rather, nature and culture are inseparably intertwined and belong to Country. The removal of minerals, plants and animals from Country also removes them from living cultural relations.

For contemporary natural history museums, such collections constitute, quite literally, a record of life on Earth. Specimens gathered over centuries allow us to trace evolutionary change, understand extinction, map shifting climates and respond to emerging biosecurity threats. A bird skin collected in the 1890s, a pressed plant from a now-cleared grassland, a drawer of insects from a vanished wetland — each contribute evidence to the long environmental history of the continent. These collections underpin research in taxonomy, conservation biology, genetics, epidemiology and climate science. They inform environmental policy, guide species recovery programs and help us understand the accelerating ecological transformations of the Anthropocene. Without natural history collections, we would be navigating ecological crises with amnesia.

Yet this scientific significance has often obscured the deep entanglement of natural history collecting with imperial and colonial ambitions. It has also obscured the continuing significance of these collections to First Peoples, for whom they remain ancestral belongings embedded within enduring systems of knowledge, law and responsibility that have persisted despite the disruptions of colonisation. Far from representing only the past, these collections are living archives that continue to sustain cultural continuity, relationships to Country and intergenerational knowledge.

This article reports on a provenance research project funded by the German Lost Art Foundation that, from 2022 to 2025, sought to collaboratively engage with colonial-era natural history collections from Australia now held in Germany. It begins by examining natural history as a colonial practice and outlining the roles of German naturalists in the Australian colonies. It then maps the current state of provenance research into colonial natural history collections in Germany and elsewhere before presenting an account of our collaboration. The article's narrative shift towards a dialogic structure in the last third of the text reflects both the evolution of the project and the challenge of presenting its outcomes in ways that remain accountable to the different perspectives, responsibilities and relationships that collaborators brought to it. Accordingly, the next four sections are jointly written by Rebecca Carland, an Australian museum professional, and Anja Schwarz, a German university academic. They are followed by excerpts from recorded conversations with Aunty Glenda Nicolls (Wadi Wadi, Yorta Yorta and Ngarrindjeri) and Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy (Tati Tati, Wadi Wadi and Mutti Mutti) who, throughout the project, offered cultural expertise on museum holdings related to the Murray River expedition and here present the project's outcomes from their perspectives. We conclude with reflections on how projects such as ours can reposition natural history collections as living archives that support cultural continuity, and have the potential to transform both the institutions that house these collections and the scientific practices they sustain.

Scientific imperialism: natural history as colonial practice

From its establishment as a scientific discipline, the field of natural history was closely entangled with imperial expansion. Late eighteenth-century expeditions outside Europe frequently included naturalists, geologists, botanists and zoologists tasked with documenting flora, fauna and geological features. Framed as scientific and philanthropic endeavours, their work advanced scientific knowledge while also identifying resources for extraction and regions suitable for settlement. Within already established colonies, naturalists worked closely with colonial administrations and operated through imperial infrastructures such as shipping routes and postal systems, often maintained by military force. Their research supported resource exploitation. For instance, geological surveys enabled systematic mining, while global networks of botanical gardens facilitated the transfer, study and commercial cultivation of plants in the colonies and in imperial centres, reshaping ecosystems in both places.

In Australia, as elsewhere, these activities depended heavily on the knowledge and labour of First Peoples, who guided expeditions, negotiated access to land, helped locate and preserve minerals, plants and animals, and shared their knowledge

about them. Yet their contributions remain largely obscured in historical records. Even when acknowledged, as in the work of William Blandowski, whose expedition became the focus of our project, naturalists' accounts of these collaborations often shed little light on the complex conditions under which natural history collections were assembled. On the one hand, these encounters created possibilities for working together, mutual recognition and First Peoples' agency. At the same time, however, expeditions were often undertaken in regions already profoundly affected by colonial warfare and settlement. The science produced under these circumstances reflects the contingent nature of these collaborations and continues to bear the imprint of these conditions. While minerals, animals and plants were often collected with the expertise of First Peoples, the authority to name and classify them remained concentrated in metropolitan centres such as Berlin, London and Paris. Like the physical removal of minerals, plants and animals from Country, taxonomy functioned as an instrument of empire, detaching living relations from local knowledge systems and reconstituting them within European frameworks. To this day, many so-called type specimens — the reference objects defining global biodiversity — remain housed in institutions in the Global North.

German naturalists in Australia

Natural history collections from Australia have historically held particular significance for British and continental European natural history museums, and other related museums. James Cook's decision to name the site of his first landing 'Botany Bay' in 1770, due to the '*great quantity of new plants*' collected there, foreshadowed the enduring European perception of Australia as scientifically rich and rewarding.¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, Australian plants and animals played a central role in the emerging fields of plant and animal taxonomy, as classification systems were expanded and revised to accommodate unfamiliar species. Such collections enhanced the reputations of the naturalists who compiled and identified them, as well as the prestige of the institutions that housed them.

German-speaking naturalists were involved in the Australian colonies from the outset, taking on a range of roles.² Our project has focused primarily on William Blandowski, who was appointed government zoologist for the colony of Victoria in 1854 and led the first government-sponsored expedition along the Millu / Dhungala / Murundi (Wadi Wadi / Yorta Yorta / Ngarrindjeri names for the Murray River) in 1856–1857, and on his expedition draughtsman Gerard Krefft, who later served as curator and secretary of the Australian Museum in Sydney from 1861 to 1874.

The careers of Blandowski and Krefft reflect a set of conditions that drew a disproportionately high number of professionally trained German naturalists to the Australian colonies. One key factor was the significant transformation of natural history in the early nineteenth century across continental Europe and Britain. Once the preserve of aristocratic elites, natural history was increasingly embraced as a

¹ Cook, J. (1768–1771). *Journal of H.M.S. Endeavour* [Manuscript]. Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-228958440/view?partId=nla.obj-228958639>

² Home, R. W. (1995). *Science as a German export to nineteenth century Australia*. Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, p. 17.

respectable pursuit among the middle classes. In the German states, this broadening of natural history expertise across class boundaries was closely tied to major university reforms, which, from 1810 onwards, enabled children of the professional and administrative classes to pursue university education.³ The motivations that led these university-trained German naturalists to relocate to the Australian colonies were complex. Some, aligned with the 1848–1849 uprisings across the German Confederation and the Austrian Empire, sought a more favourable political climate. Many were pursuing recognition in their scientific fields and greater economic security. The colonies offered new professional opportunities, particularly in geology, botany and zoology, where their expertise was in demand for government surveys, scientific institutions and commercial enterprises.

While based in the Australian colonies, most of these German-speaking naturalists continued to maintain close ties with their German homelands: they corresponded with peers, shipped collections and took an active interest in emerging German colonial ambitions.⁴ In turn, German publics followed their careers with enthusiasm, often celebrating them as ‘pioneers’ of a distinctly German contribution to the broader, pan-European colonial project.⁵ These naturalists reveal how German natural history was deeply engaged in colonial science across imperial boundaries long before and also outside of Germany’s formal colonial empire. The Australian collections held by German institutions stand as enduring evidence of this entangled colonial legacy.

Rethinking natural history in postcolonial provenance research

German museums were comparatively slow to address the colonial nature of many of their collections, particularly when compared with Australian institutions. Throughout much of the twentieth century, claims to belongings from their communities of origin were largely met with indifference. Decisions about how to respond to requests for information, access or return were typically left to staff at individual institutions. This changed markedly in the 2010s, when the legacies of German colonialism became the subject of public debate and provenance research into colonial collections underwent increasing institutionalisation.

The growing number of requests from communities worldwide for the return of Ancestral Remains and culturally significant items has been a major factor driving this shift, most recently reflected in the *Joint guidelines* for dealing with collections from colonial contexts (2025), adopted by federal, state and local governments in Germany.⁶ Particularly significant in the Australian context were the returns of Ancestors to the Torres Strait and mainland Australia in 2013 and 2014, following the first major German provenance research project on Ancestral Remains conducted at the Berlin-based hospital Charité.⁷ Since then, an increasing number of German institutions

³ Home, R. W. (1995), p. 17.

⁴ Kirchberger, U. (2020). Temporalising nature: Chronologies of colonial species transfer and ecological change across the Indian Ocean in the age of empire. *International Review of Environmental History*, 6(1), pp. 101–125. <https://doi.org/10.22459/IREH.06.01.2020.05>

⁵ Schwarz, A. (2025). ‘Pioneers of culture’: Australian natural history and the German colonial imaginary. *Continuum*, 39(1), pp. 196–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2024.2394957>

⁶ German contact point for cultural property and human remains from colonial contexts. (2025). *Joint guidelines for dealing with cultural property and human remains from colonial contexts*. https://www.germancontactpoint.org/relevant_documents/20251126_Joint%20Guidelines_for_Dealing_with_Cultural_Property_and_Human_Remains_from_Colonial_Contexts.pdf

⁷ Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin. (n.d.). *Human remains project*. Fächerverbund Anatomie. https://anatomie.charite.de/ueber_den_

have been willing to respond to community demands for the return of Ancestors and, increasingly, cultural belongings.

Yet provenance research into colonial collections in Germany and elsewhere has focused primarily on Ancestral Remains and ethnographic collections. While the German Museums Association provides guidelines for the care of collections from colonial contexts,⁸ these offer only limited direction for tracing the colonial provenance of natural history collections and provide almost no guidance on recognising natural history collections as potential cultural belongings.

Natural history collections are seldom considered in relation to colonialism for two main reasons. First, minerals, animals and plants are predominantly understood as objects of scientific and public interest — not for how they relate to human societies past or present, but for what they are taken to represent beyond human intervention. Second, as noted in the introduction to this essay, such collections are often framed as part of humanity's shared biodiversity heritage rather than as the belongings of specific groups and are rarely understood as constituted through their belonging to Country.⁹

This limited recognition of the cultural, political and relational dimensions of minerals, plants and animals continues to shape contemporary provenance research infrastructures and restitution practices. It also informs the organisation of archives, the classification of collections and the structure of collection databases. As a result, connections between natural history and colonialism often remain difficult to discern in collections and exhibitions.

This practice is, however, slowly beginning to change. Australian institutions such as the Australian Museum and Museums Victoria have been leading this shift, with First Peoples-led collection management and exhibition development,¹⁰ while institutions across Europe and the United Kingdom are also beginning to critically reassess their collections, displays and interpretive strategies. At Berlin's Museum of Natural History, for example, extensive research has examined the colonial history of the iconic *Giraffatitan* skeleton displayed in the museum's atrium. A dedicated exhibit now recounts its excavation in the former colony of German East Africa, in present-day Tanzania.¹¹ At the Natural History Museum in London, initiatives such as the 'Black history at the Natural History Museum' project have foregrounded the previously overlooked work of Black and Indigenous individuals, highlighting, for example, how the taxidermy skills of formerly enslaved man John Edmonstone (life dates unknown) enabled Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) Galápagos collections.¹² Meanwhile at Manchester Museum, the 'Decolonise!' trail invites visitors to critically engage with objects from Africa and Asia — interventions designed to disrupt traditional

[faecherverbund/human_remains_projekt](#), accessed 15 November 2025.

⁸ German Museums Association. (2021). *Guidelines for German museums: Care of collections from colonial contexts* (3rd ed.). <https://www.museumbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/mb-leitfaden-en-web.pdf>

⁹ German Museums Association. (2021), p. 110.

¹⁰ Both institutions now have dedicated First Peoples departments leading practice in collection management and exhibition development: Museums Victoria (Justice Nelson, head of First Peoples engagement, and Shannon Faulkhead, head of First Peoples collections and research) and the Australian Museum (Laura McBride, director, First Nations).

¹¹ Heumann, I., Vennen, M., & Stoecker, H. (Eds.). (2024). *Deconstructing dinosaurs: The history of the German Tendaguru expedition and its finds, 1906–2023*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004691063>

¹² Natural History Museum. (n.d.). *Black history at the Natural History Museum*. <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/black-history-at-the-natural-history-museum.html>, accessed 3 September 2025.

Eurocentric narratives embedded in natural history displays.¹³ These efforts mark an important shift towards recognising that natural history collections are not neutral repositories of knowledge, but are instead entangled with the political and historical forces that shaped their formation. There is still, however, limited recognition in Europe of the ongoing connections these collections have to Country, and of the cultural knowledge and continuing Indigenous authority embedded within them.

Berlin's Australian Archive — shifting authority

For German project leads Anja Schwarz and Eva Bischoff, the impetus for Berlin's Australian Archive: Addressing the Colonial Legacies of Natural History came from insights shared by First Peoples museum professionals, including Walbanja-Yuin woman Sarah Kiangia Judge, an environmental scientist at the Australian Museum. Judge emphasises her *'cultural relationships with living, breathing, creative Country — the dynamic world that shapes all things, all happenings, and all lives'*. From this perspective, animal bodies in museum collections are not inert specimens but *'living beings with stories, Ancestors, and important ecosystem roles that support us all'*, recognised as *'teachers, Ancestors, and law/lore keepers of First Nations people'*.¹⁴ In light of this, Schwarz and Bischoff asked what it would mean to begin recognising natural items held in a major institution such as Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde (MfN) as potential cultural belongings. They were struck by the scattered references to First Peoples within the collections, and by the limited recognition in German institutions of First Peoples' authority in relation to these materials.

In 2020, Schwarz and Bischoff convened a two-day online workshop bringing together researchers and collection specialists from major natural science institutions in south-eastern Australia and Berlin. Recognising the need for expertise at the intersection of natural history, museum practice and First Peoples engagement, they invited collaborators from Museums Victoria and the Australian Museum. From the outset the project developed as an exercise in collaborative provenance research: not simply tracing collector histories, but working across institutions, disciplines and communities to reassemble a dispersed archive and attempt to newly recognise its ongoing connection to Country. Early work centred on reconstructing connections between minerals, animals and plants held in collections, archival documents and illustrations, undertaking a systematic stocktake across the 11 departments of the MfN. This revealed the extent to which collections had been separated by discipline-specific cataloguing systems — ranging from hand-written registers to disparate digital databases — producing a 'flattening' effect, whereby materials removed from Country were further detached from their historical and cultural contexts once inside the museum.

¹³ Manchester Museum. (n.d.). *Decolonise!* <https://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/decolonise/>, accessed 3 September 2025.

¹⁴ Judge, S. K. (n.d.). *Who is country?* The Australian Museum. <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/burra/who-is-country/>, accessed 21 February 2026.



Figure 1, Left: A stylised view of 'Blandowski's Camp', from his unpublished manuscript, *Australien in 142 photographischen Abbildungen nach zehnjährigen Erfahrungen zusammengestellt* (1862) held in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin. **Right:** Zoological material and fieldnotes from the expedition held at Melbourne Museum, 2020. Museums Victoria; photographer: Jon Augier.

Collaboration with Australian partners was essential in shaping both the direction and the ethics of this collaborative provenance work, as was the oversight of our advisory board.¹⁵ Over many hours of virtual meetings and face-to-face workshops in Berlin, representatives from Museums Victoria¹⁶ and the Australian Museum¹⁷ enabled the team to focus their attention on provenance information that could reliably point to communities of origin. They also helped to identify content of possible benefit and interest to those communities and assisted the Berlin institutions in building relationships with relevant communities.

It was through these exchanges that the 1856–1857 expedition along the Millu / Dhungala / Murundi was identified as especially significant for the project. Over 12 months, the expedition had worked closely with numerous First Peoples whose labour, knowledge and guidance enabled the collection of approximately 17,000 zoological, botanical and geological entities. Blandowski openly acknowledged these contributions in his published report and also compiled an extensive visual archive documenting daily life, industry and ceremony.¹⁸ Following his death in 1878, after his return to Germany, items and archival materials related to the expedition were dispersed across German and Australian institutions.

¹⁵ Lynette Russell (Monash University), Laura McBride (Australian Museum) and Kimberley Moulton (Museums Victoria/Tate Modern) after she stepped away from the main project team.

¹⁶ The Museums Victoria team leading the Australia-based fieldwork consisted of Kimberley Moulton, senior curator of south-eastern Australian collections (later replaced by Caine Muir, Back to Country curator); Rebecca Carland, senior curator of history of collections; Timothy Stranks, lead researcher; and Jessica Alderton, Berlin's Australian Archive project coordinator.

¹⁷ The Australian Museum team was led by Laura McBride, director of First Peoples, and Mariko Smith, strategic lead, with input from archivist Vanessa Finney and repatriation officer Clayton Simpson.

¹⁸ For a detailed updated reading of the expedition based on the findings of this project see Stranks, T. (2026). William Blandowski goes bush! The lower Murray expedition, 1856–1857, in this edition of *PRISM*.

These are now held at Museums Victoria, the Australian Museum in Sydney and the State Library of New South Wales, as well as at the MfN, the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Staatsbibliothek Berlin (State Library Berlin). A self-published account of the expedition is also preserved at the Haddon Library in Cambridge, alongside copies held in Berlin, Melbourne and Sydney. This widespread dispersal fractured the intellectual and cultural coherence of the collection and obscured its ongoing connections to Country. It also underscores the importance of inter-institutional and international approaches to provenance research on Australian natural history collections.

In examining these archival materials, two types of documentation emerged as being potentially significant for River Nations. First, documentation relating to the cumbungi (*Typha*) industry along the Millu / Dhungala / Murundi contained information about traditional fibre harvesting, net-making practices and the food sources this labour produced. This documentation included scientific illustrations, notes, fibre samples, nets, fish and ducks. Second, Blandowski's scientific illustrations contained detailed linguistic annotations that appeared to record species-level word lists across multiple language groups.

In line with the core intent of the project, Museums Victoria invited respected experts and Elders from the Murray River region to join the project as collaborators and to guide the relationship-building phase. Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy, a leader in language revitalisation, and Auntie Glenda Nicholls, a master weaver and cultural practitioner, travelled to Berlin in 2024. Their visit required the MfN to engage with questions of cultural safety for the first time. The first-ever smoking ceremony was hosted on museum grounds, while access protocols for culturally sensitive materials were reconsidered.

Together with the rest of the project team, Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy and Auntie Glenda Nicholls determined that certain natural history illustrations should not be made publicly accessible online because of their cultural significance.

These engagements also prompted a conceptual shift within Berlin-based institutions. At the MfN, collections long understood as documenting 'natural history' began to be understood as cultural belongings, while human-made items from the Murray River expedition held in the nearby Ethnologisches Museum began to be recognised in relation to the animal drawings held in the MfN archives.

In some ways, it is perhaps unsurprising that Blandowski's 'collections' exceed present-day institutional and national boundaries, and that materials associated with him are now dispersed across Australian and German natural history museums, ethnological collections and state libraries. William Blandowski does not fit easily within contemporary national or disciplinary categories. He was not simply Australian, British or German, nor was his work confined to either natural history collecting or ethnography. Appointed government zoologist, he was tasked with assembling natural history collections during a government-sponsored expedition in the British colony of Victoria. At the same time, he pursued an ambitious publication on Australia for German-speaking audiences that sought to follow a Humboldtian model, treating geography, climate, biology and culture as interconnected spheres of knowledge.



Figure 2: Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy performing a smoking ceremony at MfN to '*cleanse negative energies and to arrive properly at the place*', May 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: MfN Staff Photographer.



Figure 3: Project collaborators Aunty Glenda Nicholls and Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy viewing Blandowski/Kreffft illustrations at MfN Berlin, May 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Stranks; copyright Museums Victoria.

As a result, items originating from the Murray River expedition — and of significance to River Nations — are dispersed across institutions, often in counterintuitive ways shaped by historical cataloguing practices. A glass vial containing plant fibre, for example, is held at the Ethnologisches Museum, while detailed drawings documenting cultural practices are held at the MfN and the State Library. A more complete understanding of these materials emerges only when they are considered together: the plant fibres held at the Ethnologisches Museum become legible as part of Blandowski's documentation of net-making when considered alongside the drawings held at the MfN. Many of the fish and birds depicted in these drawings are specimens now held at Museums Victoria and were caught by First Peoples using these nets during the Murray River expedition

Building on these insights into the entangled cultural character of natural history collections, workshops for Berlin-based museum staff explored Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), the concept of 'Country' in south-eastern Australia and approaches to culturally responsive collections care. Aunty Glenda's demonstration of feather-flower making — an intergenerational cultural practice — provided an embodied reminder that the collections are connected to living traditions rather than a concluded past.



Figure 4: Aunty Glenda Nicholls running a feather-flower making workshop for museum and library staff at MfN, Berlin, May 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Stranks; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 5: Participants of the Berlin's Australian Archive workshop following the Welcome Ceremony and cultural performances, Old Camp, Tati Tati Country, Robinvale, March 2025. Photographer: Rob French; copyright Museums Victoria.

The most important moment in the project came when Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy invited the extended German and Australian project team (including collections and scientific staff from the Berlin museums) to share our findings with River Nations cultural practitioners, artists, weavers and language revivalists on beautiful Tati Tati Country. The three-day workshop held in Robinvale-Euston in March 2025 was a profoundly generous and powerful cultural exchange.

Authority was not merely abstractly acknowledged but enacted, as River Nations delegates articulated how these materials relate to continuing cultural responsibilities and community priorities. At the workshop, materials held in Berlin relating to the *Typha* industry were brought vividly to life when Tati Tati participants presented an eight-metre-tall bullrush, pulled moments earlier from the nearby river bend. This act highlighted the immediate relevance of these historical records to Country and sparked discussion of the significant ecological changes the river had undergone in the 170 years since the expedition.

Senior weavers attending the workshop continued to knot and weave throughout the presentations, demonstrating their ongoing connection to the net-making practices documented in the historical records. It was evident that the gathering was also creating a space for the refining and sharing of practice amongst these cultural weaving leaders.



Figure 6: *View on the Lower Darling: the Albury, Steamer, at Wentworth* [Hand-coloured engraving], circa 1872. Hoddell and Butcher. Source: *Town and Country Journal*. Private collection.

During an extended yarning circle, participants emphasised the need to ensure the cultural safety of the knowledge embedded in the collections and proposed the development of a Millu / Dhungala / Murundi River Peoples research group to guide decisions concerning ICIP and access. In this context, collaborative provenance research found its clearest expression: not only tracing where collections came from, but recognising their ongoing belonging to Country and Community. Through these processes, the Berlin's Australian Archive project demonstrates how collaborative provenance research can move beyond documentation to become a practice of reconnecting belongings to Country by recognising the Indigenous expertise that underpinned their formation.

Millu / Dhungala / Murundi Kulingi yarna (Murray River people talking)

Those involved in the project came to it for different reasons. We were engaged in what Unanga scholar Eve Tuck and colleagues have called 'contingent collaborations', which 'require an ethic of incommensurability that recognizes what is distinct between various projects of social justice and decolonization'.¹⁹ For project collaborators Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy and Aunty Glenda Nicholls, this work forms part of decades-long efforts to revive culture and pursue self-determination and sovereignty. Their perspectives therefore cannot be seamlessly woven into an account written largely from within, or adjacent to, the settler-colonial institution of the museum. Accordingly, the following reflections are drawn from conversations recorded on the banks of Millu following the three-day gathering on Tati Tati Country in March 2025. They should not be understood as participant reflections alone, but as assertions of positions that remain distinct from, while allied with, those of the core project team.

¹⁹ Tuck, E., Smith, M., Guess, A. M., Benjamin, T., & Jones, B. K. (2014). Geotheorizing Black/Land: Contestations and contingent collaborations. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 3(1), pp. 52–74, p. 57.

Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy is a renowned artist, language expert and political actor from Robinvale, Victoria. His totem is the Pathangal (pelican) and his name Millu Wudungi (Murray River man) reflects his longstanding commitment to the Millu and his ongoing fight for land and water justice for the Traditional Owners of the Murray-Darling Basin. As chair of the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), he plays a vital role in advancing First Peoples' water rights. His cultural practice encompasses language revitalisation and visual storytelling through art, sustaining ancestral knowledge and expressing enduring connections to Country.

Artist and master weaver Aunty Glenda Nicholls grew up in the Swan Hill area. Her cultural name is Jule Yarra Minj (little river girl) and her maternal Ngarrindjeri totem is the Writcharuki (Willy-willy Wagtail). She creates elaborate sculptural works connecting the present with her ancestral past. In her practice, she combines cultural weaving techniques acquired from her ancestors, mother and grandmother with her knowledge of the waterways, plants and grasses on her Country.

Significant belongings in Berlin

The part of William Blandowski's collection in Berlin that I was really interested in was the fishing net, because I do fish-net weaving. So that was a bit of excitement when I saw the fish-net and figured out what it was made out of — cumbungi — looking at the mesh size, looking at and researching what kind of fish was caught with that specific net. The fish-net was a two ply ... I found that really interesting, looking at that and wondering, now, how is it so light that it could float on top of the water to catch the Bony Bream, you know, with the antenna on the top. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

The actual drawings, the depictions were amazing. For me, that's what stands out: the Gerard Krefft paintings and drawings of the time from the Blandowski expedition, particularly in Merbein and Mondellimin along the river. So, looking at those and looking at the cultural belongings, and also the archive, particularly the language, was what interests me the most. (Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy)

Beyond the collection — 'the intangibles'

People say we need to bring it home, and that will probably happen, but that takes time. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

The returning of the other belongings, that's like, okay, that could be something we could aspire to, but it's all the things we create along the way. All the conversations, all the dialogue, all the knowledge-sharing, all the wellbeing that it creates by coming together and that sharing. Those are the intangibles that I think will be created and what we'll take out of it. (Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy)

Cumbungi's found right along the waterways here. So, assuming that the fish-net could have been made anywhere ... there's a whole process of harvesting the cumbungi, making the string, making the fibre, weaving the net and then using the net. So, it would have taken a whole community — families — to harvest the cumbungi, to make that string, and then to weave the net. Those nets must have been pretty prized tools. They're tools we don't use today, but back then they were essential. There's a lot that's not written. Back then it was a man's world, so men only seem to be doing things. Not the women. Women were very protective of some of the things that were women's business. So, there's a lot that's not recorded. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

I'm not making those kinds of nets, but I'll turn it into art so that it's still there for everyone to see. It gets people thinking — how did you do that? Why are you making fish-nets? And the stories come out. It was a tool that our people used years ago. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

Building blocks for the future

This journey doesn't stop with me. It's very important for me to be able to pass on that knowledge to the community because, at the moment, I think I'm the only one that does fish-net weaving in my area. A lot of the workshop participants have realised that what they've learned they'll take that back to their communities and build on that knowledge themselves. We've started something that's going to be a building block for others. I would like to see future generations carrying it on. That's why we need to bring the younger ones on the journey with us — so they can continue it. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

I think for me what's emerged from the project is inspiration: what inspired Blandowski in the first place, and now that's inspired the museums to come together and then bring opportunities out here to have workshops, and then how that has inspired the Murray River peoples. I've just been sent as a scout, really, to then come back and talk to our people about it, creating this opportunity, this workshop, and contributing to the workshop and sharing, and advocating and providing guidance and support for our people to have access to the information. It has been great for us, great to be the host. It's great to create a culturally safe space for everyone to come and feel welcome and feel respected and recognised for the knowledge and the history of what everyone brings here. I didn't expect it to be as successful and enjoyable, and the creativity, the knowledge-sharing and the interest that was shown by everyone that attended. People will go away, they will remember this workshop and they will feel energised and informed, and come away with a lot more knowledge and be inspired by this workshop.

It always leads and builds to other opportunities in the space, in the research space, in the universities, in the museum space, in the cultural heritage space. So, it gives us more opportunities to come together and to have dialogue and exchange with each other. We are a culture on the way back. We were almost wiped to extinction, but we are on the way back. So, every opportunity and every event like this is unprecedented.
(Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy)

Outcomes and futures

The reflections above underscore that the significance of these collections cannot be understood solely through archival reconstruction or institutional interpretation. Their meanings continue to unfold through the knowledge, practices and responsibilities held by the communities to whom they remain connected. Listening to these perspectives reshapes how a project like Berlin's Australian Archive must be understood — not simply as research about historical materials, but as part of an ongoing cultural process in which relationships to Country, knowledge transmission and future custodianship are actively negotiated.

One of the most tangible outcomes of the project has been the creation of a provenance research guide, published by the German Lost Art Foundation.²⁰ Developed from the practical challenges encountered during the project, the guide is intended to support future researchers — Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike — in navigating the methodological, ethical and relational complexities of working with natural history collections shaped by colonial encounters. It positions provenance research not as a purely archival exercise, but as a collaborative process requiring an openness to multiple knowledge systems and sustained dialogue with communities who have always upheld their relationship to Country. Complementing this work is the development of a finding aid for the 1856–1857 Murray River expedition, designed primarily to support members of the River Nations in accessing these materials. One of its central aims is to make collections that have long appeared impenetrable — shaped by specialist scientific language, disciplinary silos and institutional hierarchies — more navigable and meaningful to those seeking to engage with them. By translating and contextualising archival and taxonomic information, the finding aid helps bridge these barriers while making transparent where the project has been able to trace relationships between minerals, animals and plants, records, associated knowledge and their ongoing connections to Country. In doing so, it seeks to support First Peoples in identifying materials connected to their own lands and cultural histories, enabling pathways for community-led research, interpretation and decision-making.

For European museums, these outcomes point towards a necessary shift in institutional culture and practice. Engagement with colonial collections cannot remain project-based or symbolic; it must be embedded in staff training, documentation, cataloguing practices and decision-making structures that recognise ICIP and support

²⁰ Möhrle, F., Schwarz, A., & Bischoff, E. (Eds.). (2026). *Provenance research guide on natural history collections from colonial Australia*. German Lost Art Foundation.

long-term relationships with communities. The work demonstrates that natural history institutions, no less than ethnographic museums, must grapple with their role in historic extraction and knowledge displacement.

For Australian institutions, the project highlights their role as experienced partners in this work, drawing on decades of engagement in repatriation, community consultation and Indigenous-led practice to support European colleagues navigating processes that remain relatively new within their own institutional contexts. At the same time, these collaborations are not presented as a completed model or endpoint. Australian museums, too, continue to confront the enduring legacies of colonial collecting and are themselves still learning, adapting and being guided by communities with each project undertaken. The exchange therefore operates as a reciprocal process, underscoring that this work is ongoing everywhere.

The project also contributes to expanding debates around repatriation and restitution. As discussed in this article, much of the material addressed — minerals, plants and animals held in collections, along with illustrations and archives categorised as natural history — has historically fallen outside repatriation frameworks focused on Ancestral Remains or explicitly cultural objects. As our collaborators have clearly articulated, everything from Country is Country. By demonstrating that these materials carry embedded cultural knowledge, language and histories of collaboration, projects like Berlin's Australian Archive challenge the assumed boundary between 'scientific' and 'cultural' collections and invite new models of shared custodianship, community-directed governance and, ultimately, return.

Finally, the project raises questions about scientific authority itself. Recognising First Peoples as contributors to the production of natural history knowledge unsettles long-standing hierarchies that have elevated scientific frameworks rooted in colonial histories above local expertise. While both scientific classification and local expertise offer systematic ways of understanding the world, they operate under different logics: scientific taxonomy aspires to universality and comparability, whereas local knowledge has obligations to specific places and contexts. The value of one does not necessarily equate to the other, but both offer insights that can inform research in complementary ways. Rather than diminishing scientific inquiry, this recognition enlarges it, inviting research practices grounded in reciprocity with Country and attentive to the cultural conditions through which knowledge is generated.

Perhaps the most powerful outcome, however, occurred beyond institutional frameworks. Seven months after the project gathering on Tati Tati Country, more than 120 River Nations culture keepers, practitioners and kin reconvened independently, without the presence of the partner museums. This continuation signalled that the work had begun to move into community hands, where its meanings and futures could be shaped according to local priorities. Such moments resist easy measurement, yet they point to the reparative potential of collaborative provenance research: creating conditions for knowledge to circulate back into living cultural systems rather than remaining confined to institutional archives.