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# TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS – BUILDING SPACES

# FOR INDIGENOUS SELF-DETERMINATION IN LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

## *In Brief*

*This article explores questions regarding the development and support of Indigenous priorities and self-determination in Australian libraries and archives. It calls for greater use of Indigenous research methodologies within library and archival science in order to seek ways to decolonize and simultaneously indiginze libraries and archives. As a written reflection, the article shares the perspectives of the author, who has worked in the sector for the past two decades as an Indigenous Australian archivist. The article argues that more difficult dialogue needs to to take place around contested views of history, and around the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in library and archival praxis. It suggests that transformation can only start to be imagined when we acknowledge the*

*ongoing effects of colonization on the lives of Indigenous peoples, and examine the ways that the colonial process continues to marginalize Indigenous people. The author explores questions of Indigenous cultural safety, opportunities for increasing Indigenous voice and representation and the implementation of Indigenous Protocols to enable truth-telling and activism around Indigenous community priorities.*

By [Kirsten Thorpe](#)

# Introduction

Indigenous peoples in Australia have a complex relationship with libraries and archives. They are both places of distrust (McKemmish, Faulkhead & Russell, 2011) and places which hold significant cultural heritage materials that can be drawn upon for language and cultural revitalization (Thorpe & Galassi, 2014). Our major cultural and collecting institutions also hold evidence of Australia's history of colonization – genocide, dispossession, and forced control over the lives of Indigenous Australian people, families, and children. There is recognition nationally and internationally that libraries and archives need to be decolonized (Luker, 2017; O'Neal, 2015) – yet, there remains a huge amount of work to be done to reshape and reassert Indigenous perspectives in libraries and

archives. This includes, for example, the need for us to reframe our national histories which are dominated by colonial narratives that other Indigenous Australian peoples and communities (Behrendt, 2016). This article argues for the decolonization and simultaneous Indigenization of library and archive practice and research. It calls for a transformation of practice and theory through dialogue and reflection – to build transformative praxis – so that librarians and archivists can work more effectively with their respective communities in culturally safe ways.

Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives is an emerging area in Australia, yet most calls for action and transformation are channeled through institutional contexts which often lack an understanding of Indigenous histories, cultures, and ways of knowing, being and doing. With so many issues to tackle in terms of transformation, institutions often work to Indigenize libraries, without necessarily thinking through the structural issues that need dismantling through decolonization. Some of the key questions which are not adequately addressed are: How can libraries and archives engage with Indigenous peoples and communities to build mutual partnerships within current frameworks? Can libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions seek to indigenize – that is, build spaces for Indigenous self-determination and voice – without first considering what roles they play in perpetuating colonial systems and structures?

One of the ways in which Indigenous self-determination has been enacted in institutional contexts has been through the adoption of Indigenous protocols, as well as through efforts to employ Indigenous peoples as librarians, archivists, curators, and liaison officers. However, the representation of Indigenous people in the Australian library and archive sector is at crisis level.[1] The adoption of protocols and guidelines in public libraries, archives, and cultural institutions has been ad-hoc and their development not aligned with appropriate plans for action. The articulation and progression of priorities is also at the hands of non-Indigenous leadership and whilst there is general support for protocols – which have been used for over twenty years in the Australian context – there remain major power and structural issues in play for them to be successfully implemented and supported by the appropriate cultural authority of Indigenous peoples and communities. This article argues for a transformation of theory and practice in order to realize Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives. Without this transformation Indigenous people will continue to be silenced and marginalized and made to feel culturally unsafe.

## Methodology

I draw on Nakata's concepts of Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) and the Cultural Interface (Nakata 2002, 2007a, 2007b). I utilize autoethnography as a

method to share information on projects that I have been involved within research and practice across the cultural sector, which sought to enable spaces for Indigenous people to have greater autonomy and voice (Houston, 2007, p.45). Autoethnography has been an important tool for me to engage in reflexivity and to draw out issues that have emerged over my professional career on both an 'experiential and intellectual level' (Bainbridge, 2007, p.8).

I also draw on critical theory from an Indigenous perspective (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). I am inspired by Kaupapa Maori Theory which is both critical and anticolonial, and which challenges dominant systems of power (Pihama, 2015, p.11). Within this framework, the concept of 'Decolonization' is at the core of concerns for transformation (Smith, 2012) and 'Praxis' is envisaged as a dialectic relation between theory and practice and a place for 'conscientisation, resistance and transformative action' (Smith, 2015, p.18). I consider Praxis in this article in the way that Pihami draws on Freire's (1985) notion of dialectical unity, where: "Dialectical unity acknowledges the interdependence of theory to practice and vice versa. One cannot act fully without the other but rather there is a process of constant reflection and reshaping as each part of the unity informs the other" (Pihama, 2015, p.9). For me, the complex questions that come into play in library and archive practice need to be considered in relation to theory, and vice versa, a transformation will not come without this

dialogue in play.

# A note on the use of the term Indigenous

I use the term Indigenous Australian peoples within this article to broadly refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, the First Peoples of this country Australia. The use of this terminology is used whilst acknowledging the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities across Australia. This includes recognizing the diversity of experiences that communities have had with libraries and archives in urban, regional and remote contexts. I also acknowledge that my experiences have a specific focus on my being based on the east coast of Australia – the first communities to be impacted by British invasion in 1788. I would like to also acknowledge the similarities and differences with other First Peoples who have been impacted by settler-colonial experiences.

# Indigenous Standpoint: Placing myself in context

## Working as an Indigenous Archivist in Australia

I describe myself as an Indigenous archivist, and a person who has worked across a number of library and archive contexts in Australia. My family – on my mother's side – are Worimi

people from Port Stephens New South Wales (NSW), a coastal area a little over two hours from Sydney, the capital city of NSW. I came to the profession through an equity program where I undertook a cadetship to train as an Indigenous archivist. I have worked across government archives, public libraries, data archives, academic libraries, and a major research library/collecting institution. I have also been active within professional associations in Australia across libraries and archives progressing Indigenous policy, protocols and employment. I have been an advocate, a community facilitator, and an accidental leader having come into the profession at a time when only a small number of Indigenous people were employed in libraries and archives. I was the first Indigenous person in Australia to be eligible for professional membership with the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) after completing post-graduate archival studies in the late 1990s to be an archivist. I have undertaken Post-Graduate studies in Archives & Records and a Masters of Information Management and Systems (Professional) where I completed a minor thesis titled 'Creating an Aboriginal Community Archive in NSW' (Thorpe, 2017). When I reflect on two decades of professional experiences I am aware that many of the challenges I faced were so complex that they could not be solved merely with a consideration of changing practice. They required me to develop critical skills and reflection on theory (and the failure of library and archive curriculum) as well as skills to build

community partnerships and engagement to address Indigenous priorities and perspectives through reflexive praxis.

## Moving from Practice to Research

In 2018, I made a leap of faith and left a leadership role at a major Cultural Institution in Australia, the State Library of NSW, to undertake doctoral studies at Monash University and take up an academic research role within an Indigenous Research Institute, the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney. After two decades of being involved in professional practice, I felt an overwhelming sense of frustration about the lack of critical dialogue in the profession around Indigenous self-determination and cultural safety. I witnessed the constant need to come up with practical solutions or projects which aimed to engage Indigenous peoples, which were (although with good intention) fraught in design and delivery because of the way in which they were conceptualized and framed. Many of these projects also lacked acknowledgment of the deep structural issues and power dynamics that were at play. The problem was that many projects and services were not being designed with Indigenous community input or perspectives which often left the community in a position that they were asked to give approval for projects that were not reflective of community priorities or desires. I often found myself sitting in rooms having the

same decadal long conversations, going nowhere, but around and around the same wicked problems (Evans, McKemmish & Rolan, 2017, p.2). My move from practice to research is a political act in order for me to redirect my labour to work directly with communities to tackle the 'wicked problems' through activism, and informed through Indigenous methodologies and frameworks. My interests are in developing critical participatory research projects that provide an evidence base for advancing Indigenous self-determined priorities across LIS and Archival Science.

## Reflecting on Feeling Culturally Unsafe

For me, 2018 was a year to start to unlearn 'institutional thinking' and an opportunity to begin writing and speaking with academic freedom. I want to discuss what I see are deep issues in our profession and use my experiences to shine some light on issues such as the cultural safety of Indigenous people who both work in, and engage with libraries and archives. I personally feel that I have put myself on the line (body, soul, spirit, mind) for many years navigating these issues and sometimes the work has made me feel incredibly unsafe. I felt unsafe around the weight of our colonial history and working in places where people have not understood the ongoing effects of this history in the day to day lives of Indigenous Australian people. I've also experienced stress as I have had to politely explain Indigenous perspectives to

people who were not aware of their own positionality – their unconscious bias, stereotypes and prejudice – and their blinded support for systems that supported the continued colonization of Indigenous Australian people. This often means having to support people with their own white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), while using your own emotional labour to make sure that other non-Indigenous people feel 'ok' as they engage in difficult conversations.

On the other side of the coin, working in institutional contexts has also placed me in complex spaces when working to support access for Indigenous peoples and communities. When people access traumatic and biased records or information you need to take a role of supporter, contextualizing and explaining what the content and context of materials is likely to be, whilst at the same time being very aware of the ability of these materials to retraumatize people. I have witnessed sadness, anger, frustration as part of this process, working as an intermediary between the institution and the community. A vulnerable feeling of not really being fully in the institution, nor fully in the community. Being in a leadership role also required me to continue the day to day work, whilst at the same time having a view of how to make structural changes which attempt to dismantle ongoing colonial processes and narratives. Some of these changes may indeed never take place because they are impossible to achieve within these

institutional contexts.

In my former role at the State Library, I helped reshape priorities around key areas such as Indigenous collecting, services across public libraries in NSW, and support for Indigenous Digital Keeping places. The Indigenous Services team at the Library continue the significant work of finding pathways to support communities with local Indigenous Digital Keeping Places. Whilst I am enormously proud of the work I have achieved over the past two decades, I know that much of the objectives achieved have required difficult dialogue: I have spent a long time working to convince people of why we needed to shift practice to respect Indigenous perspectives, histories and cultures, and to keep Indigenous people safe when engaging with library and archive spaces. I often felt like I was hitting my head on a door – suggesting pathways for change that were not within the 'normal' frame – or trying to morph Indigenous concepts, protocols and processes into systems that were unable to bend or reshape in an expansive way. The time taken for these discussions has also been extensive: sometimes it took years to simply build visibility about particular issues and to have them placed on the agenda to be discussed and resourced. In addition, the fact that many archives and libraries are public sector agencies, limits what you can and cannot achieve, as well as what you can and cannot say in these contexts. I am constantly surprised and humbled by the patience of Indigenous communities who sit

alongside this work, people who recognise the deep issues that are at play and who recognise the long struggle that is ahead to both decolonize and indigenize libraries and archives.

## Libraries and archives at the Cultural Interface

There is no doubt that one of the major challenges of progressing Indigenous priorities in the library and archive sector is the collision that exists between Indigenous and Western methods of managing information, archives, and knowledge (Nakata, 2002). There is a clash of ways of knowing, being, and doing which intersect constantly around issues of information management. For example, institutions making materials open to public access when they may need to be managed through cultural protocols, providing open public access to offensive, racist and derogatory content that puts people at risk of intergenerational trauma, and providing access to materials which are historically biased and filled with untruths that need to be contextualized in such a manner through a right of reply. We are also challenged by the need to acknowledge the impact of colonization in the work of the sector, and to find ways to engage in new transformative agendas that stop the cycle of dispossessing Indigenous peoples. Native American Scholar Roy draws on Nakata's concept of the Cultural Interface to discuss this place of tension, arguing that "Indigenous peoples live in this

interface, the place where their Indigenous life-ways and western viewpoints come together", and "a place of tension that requires constant negotiation" (Nakata 2002, p.286). Within this space, Roy suggests that "Indigenous living may either flourish or be repressed, and it is here that cultural heritage institutions reside." (Roy, 2015, p.197).

During my career, recognizing I was sitting in the Cultural Interface really helped me. I realized I was in a space where people had different notions of knowing and that, often, non-Indigenous people were not aware of what they didn't know – that they were not knowers in terms of understanding concepts such as communal decision making, kinship systems' and elders' roles, and protocols for managing information – such as who has the right to speak on certain topics. To further exacerbate this problem Indigenous Australian people are often challenged by working with professional colleagues or members of general public who have no awareness or understanding of Indigenous histories and experiences, nor the ongoing impact of government policies over the lives of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Other areas – such as the western constructions of classification and categorization and continued 'othering' of Indigenous people as subjects (Doyle & Metoyer, 2015) – continue to be areas of tension, as well as the constant failure of projects and services being designed for

rather than with Indigenous communities. It is very easy to sit inside sandstone buildings, major collecting institutions, and archives, and not engage in robust embedded conversation with communities or stakeholder groups. A number of Indigenous staff who work in the sector work tirelessly to build relationships between communities and institutions, but it often comes at a personal cost – navigating roles that extend beyond the nine to five working time – and playing multiple roles within the institution and within communities. There is often no recognition of these multiple roles in employment, either on a practical level of developing job or role descriptions that actually represent the work that you are doing, nor with the monetary value that is placed on the level of expertise. This is an area in itself that requires further discussion and research.

We can draw on the concept of the Cultural Interface as a tool to consider what Nakata describes as "intersecting trajectories" with "competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions" and where there exist "ambiguities, conflict, and contestation of meanings" (Nakata, 2007b, p. 199):

> It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought,

*competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation. It is a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses"* (Nakata, 2007b, p. 199).

One area of precaution, however, is that we need to engage in the Cultural Interface with community engagement and participation in full view, this work cannot rest on the labour and advice of Indigenous librarians and archivists who are already underrepresented in the sector. Indigenous staff have a major role to play, however, they are often placed in unsafe positions of being asked to be the expert on 'all things Indigenous' and to make decisions about issues that are not theirs to answer. Libraries and archives must engage with communities and representatives who have cultural authority to progress locally based priorities.

In order to disentangle the issues we need to draw on Indigenous and critical methodologies to engage and commit to ongoing difficult dialogue. An investment in contemplating issues within praxis as envisioned through Kaupapa Maori Theory, that is, through a conscious decision to reflect on theory and practice, would enable a reflexive loop for Indigenous community members, practitioners

and researchers to work together to expose areas of complexity and to develop pathways for transformation. Praxis will require a negotiation of power and a letting go of traditional practice in order to shape dialogue, or as Krebs (2012) suggests a 'search for win/win solutions located potentially outside the comfort zones of existing practice' (p.189).

# Key areas for transformation and support of Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives

In the next section of the article, I will suggest key areas of transformation and support for Indigenous self-determination in the library and archive sector and suggest resources for further reading and action to decolonize and indigenize libraries and archives. Centering focus on Indigenous self-determination in research and practice can be achieved in the following ways:

**Utilise Indigenous research methodologies**, including the Cultural Interface and Kaupapa Maori Theory to consciously build reflexive praxis dialogue to support Indigenous priorities. Be critically aware of the different ways of knowing that may come into play in these cross cultural exchanges and contexts. (See Nakata (2007a) for the Cultural Interface and Pihama, Tiakiwai, & Southey (2015)'s readings on Kaupapa Maori Theory).

**Draw on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** to commit support for Indigenous self-determination and use it as a mechanism to examine the power structures that either support or silence Indigenous voice. (See Gooda (2012) for discussion on how the Declaration can be used as a 'roadmap' for change across policy, services, and projects and a way to include Indigenous participation in decision-making, whilst resisting the expectation that Indigenous people 'conform to mainstream practices').

**Engage in the use of Indigenous research methods** to decolonize and indigenize projects, research, and curricula. Resist the temptation to develop research, services, or projects because 'you think it's a good idea' and instead seek advice and input on priorities from key stakeholders to make the work meaningful and relevant. (See for example Duarte & Belarde-Lewis's (2015) method of 'Imagining' and 'Creating Spaces for Indigenous Ontologies' and Smith's (2012) '25 Indigenous Projects').

**Adopt Protocols for Libraries and Archives** that are relevant to your local stakeholder groups and communities and develop action plans to bring the protocols to life. If Protocols that exist are not relevant, work with your local community to create principles and guidelines for action that are relevant. (See ATSILIRN (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network) Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services

and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) information and resource page for the history and development of the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials).

**Examine the governance structures that are in place** to support Indigenous input and perspectives by increasing Indigenous representation across decision making structures such as Boards, Director, and Executive Leadership positions. Don't do diversity with only 'entry level' positions, seek ways to bring Indigenous voice into strategic decision making roles. (See the ATSILIRN Protocols section on 'Governance and Management' and Thorpe & Byrne (2016) for a case study on how Indigenous voice and representation was considered in an institutional context).

**Work locally with Indigenous peoples to prioritize efforts** around building appropriate library and archive collections, decolonizing classification and description, as well as strategies to indigenize library spaces. (See the State Library of NSW Indigenous Collecting Strategy for an example of an institution reshaping a focus on collections created by rather than about Indigenous people. See also Doyle & Metoyer's (2015) Indigenous knowledge organization Special issue for a discussion on cataloging and description, and the State Library of NSW Indigenous Spaces in Library Places strategy to support a NSW wide focus on building a vibrant public library network

inclusive of Indigenous peoples and communities).

**Find ways to ethically engage Indigenous communities in decision-making** by respecting core values of shared-benefits and reciprocity. (See key documents such as the Australian National Health and Medical Research Councils Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders which outlines a set of principles for culturally safe research that can benefit Indigenous people).

**Resource decolonization and indigenization** and recognize that this work cannot be done on goodwill, it will require a radical reallocation of people's labour as well as time and resources to support its development. (See Thorpe & Galassi (2018) for a case study on developing a Business Plan for Indigenous Services, and examples of building priorities for institutional cultural competency in Australian National and State Libraries throughout 2019-2021).

**Lobby professional associations to support the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives** in library and archive course accreditation and core competencies of professional programs. (See the Australian Library and Information Association's recent focus on Indigenous Matters and launch of a new Indigenous Engagement Specialisation).

# Acknowledging the importance of cultural safety and intergenerational trauma in relation to libraries and archives

Indigenous Australian people continue to suffer trauma when accessing collections: this is particularly relevant to members of the Stolen Generations who have been removed from their families and communities through discriminatory colonial policies. In the library and archives field, there is not enough acknowledgment of the impact that the information included in collections can trigger and perpetuate intergenerational trauma. There is also a lack of dialogue regarding the emotional and spiritual side of access to information and records, and of how practitioners and researchers can either build positive or negative experiences for communities engaging with their collections and services.

Much has been written internationally in archival studies about the ways in which history and perspectives can be silenced within collections and services (Harris, 2002, p.69; Evans, McKemmish, Daniels & McCarthy, p.352). Libraries and archives can play an important role in facilitating truth-telling about diverse histories and experiences. A starting point for libraries and archives could be for them to assist marginalized people to tell their own stories whether through traditional publishing or

through digital curation. Truth-telling means that we cannot silence history (or parts of it), nor silence Indigenous perspectives. It also means that we need to enable opportunities for Indigenous people to give a 'right of reply' (McKemmish et al, 2011, p.231) to records which are racist and derogatory (for example, projects such as Mukurtu support this engagement and layering of voice and perspective).

Librarians and archivists are no longer in a position to profess blind ignorance of Indigenous issues, these are not new issues in the field. Professional competencies need to be built to enable ongoing dialogue and conversations about the difficult and painful histories of colonization and the ongoing impacts of these histories in relation to libraries and archives. The sector should also be more fully engaged in conversations about Indigenous cultural safety, and examination of the ways that libraries and archives can make Indigenous people feel culturally unsafe. We should aspire to build transformative praxis in a way that supports Williams' (1999) definition, where cultural safety is viewed as:

> *Cultural safety is an environment, which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with*

> *dignity, and truly listening (Williams 1999, p.213).*

Libraries and archives need to consider the cultural safety of their patrons in service and policy design, as well as consider the cultural safety of Indigenous researchers and employees in their institutions. Working in a culturally safe environment has a real impact on people; however, there is a lack of attention from institutions in acknowledging and taking action to improve these conditions. Whether the lack of focus is motivated by ignorance, fear, or inertia, it is imperative for the sector to continue conversations around social justice, redress, and truth-telling as it relates to library and archives systems, services, and programs. We need to decolonize libraries and archives whilst simultaneously indigenizing library and archive theory and practice by working in partnership with Indigenous peoples and communities. The Cultural Interface can assist us to keep with focus and clarity on identifying points of tension and complexity, whilst methodologies such as Kaupapa Maori Theory provide a framework for building dialogue on praxis and opportunities for transformation and liberation. Critical reflection on issues such as structural power, voice, and representation, can assist an unravelling of perspectives about Indigenous sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), structural racism and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), and exposure of the subtle forms of microaggressions that come into play in library and archive spaces (Dunbar, 2006).

# Conclusion – Where to next? The role of Library and Archival Praxis

I have drawn on my professional experiences in this article to advocate for Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives and have argued that more robust and difficult dialogue needs to take place around the failure of library and archive theory and practice to support Indigenous priorities. A research agenda needs to be built in partnership with Indigenous peoples and communities to direct attention to the areas that need supporting: whether it be to progress Indigenous employment in the sector, or reallocating resources from managing traditional library systems in favour of supporting systems that manage Indigenous knowledge appropriately, addressing racism and bias in cataloguing and description, or in focussing support on Indigenizing theory and curricula. Our next generation of librarians and archivists deserve to come into the field with the appropriate skills and competencies to work respectfully with Indigenous peoples and communities and to deal with complexity and wicked problems.

One key area for major change that I see in relation to this is the need for Indigenous research methodologies to be brought into tighter focus in LIS and Archival studies. It is critical that Indigenous peoples and communities are involved in the decision-making process to better shape the way we envisage libraries and archives into the future.

The sector also needs to stop the tendency of addressing complex problems with practical and temporary solutions and look for structural changes instead. Finally, new theory produced by library and archival science professionals needs to draw on multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives, drawing more thoroughly, for example, on the Social Sciences and Indigenous Studies to understand human experiences, and to create new conceptual and theoretical models that can be utilised to address recurring problems. Without these changes, the profession will continue to privilege certain sections of the population over others.

# Acknowledgments

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1. There is a lack of data on current employment rates of Indigenous Australian people across the Library and Archive sectors in Australia. The Australian Library

and Information Association (ALIA) suggest that anecdotally there are fewer than 50 people who identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the LIS profession: see https://www.alia.org.au/advocacy-and-campaigns/indigenous-matters. [    ]

2. For ongoing discussions regarding Indigenous Archives see the Indigenous Archives Collective at: https://indigenousarchives.net/ [    ]

‹    They CAN and they SHOULD and it's BOTH AND: The role of undergraduate peer mentors in the reference conversation

Dismantling Deficit Thinking: A strengths-based inquiry into the experiences of transfer students in and out of academic libraries    ›

**3 RESPONSES**

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**Ian McAlpin**
🕐 *2019–11–01 at 3:42 pm*

This article is both a force to be reckoned with

and a truly motivating guide to someone trying to walk the path to indigenize archives.

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