

COLLECTIONS

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Cover: A glass-plate negative from the Beach Studio collection of the Buffalo History Museum is prepared for long-term storage inside a four-flap folder. Photo courtesy Cynthia A. Conides.

Sovereignty, Repatriation, and the Archival Imagination: Indigenous Curation and Display Practices



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Abstract Sovereignty is an often invoked, yet notoriously misunderstood and misused term in relation to the political, territorial, cultural and economic needs, aspirations, and goals of Indigenous peoples living in post-colonial settler states. Archives were established as places where official records became anchors for nations in the making as they documented the accepted demise of their first peoples. As a result, the archival imagination is both a process of political work and ideological maneuvering. In the post-colonial imagination, archives have become hotbeds for revising the historical fictions and fantasies that allowed for the erasure and presumed demise of Indigenous peoples. As archives shift to include Indigenous voices, and as Indigenous archives assert their own prominence in the landscape, the archival imagination expands. This article analyzes the emergent archival imagination through the lens of sovereignty, repatriation movements, and digital technologies to expose the place of Indigenous rights, histories, and imaginations in the practical work of archives in post-colonial settler states. Using examples from my own collaborations in the United States and Canada with Indigenous communities and my work as the director of Mukurtu CMS, I examine how multiple stakeholders grapple with and infuse archival practices, tools, and work with the many nuances of sovereignty.

If our struggle is anything, it is a struggle for sovereignty, and if sovereignty is anything, it is a way of life. That way of life is not a matter of defining political ideology or having detached discussion about the unifying structures and essences of American Indian traditions. It is a decision—a decision we make in our minds, in our hearts, and in our bodies—to be sovereign and to find out what that means in the process.

—Robert Allen Warrior (Osage)¹

Repatriation is the most potent political metaphor for cultural revival that is going on at this time. Political sovereignty and cultural sovereignty are inextricably linked, because the ultimate goal of political sovereignty is protecting a way of life.

—W. Richard West (Cheyenne-Arapaho)²

The State of Washington's Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation stated in a short article about first contact with regional Native American peoples at Kettle Falls on the Upper Columbia River that:

Fishing at the falls was a highly organized enterprise. A salmon chief (called "See-pay," or Chief of the Waters) launched the season by spear- ing the first salmon; decided when the general harvest could begin; supervised the placement of basket traps along the rocky shoreline, and oversaw the construction of fishing platforms that extended over the turbulent water. At the end of the day, he divided the catch.³

The importance of this particular individual, in tribal communities along the great Columbia River and its tributaries, is seldom discussed in academic research on the region. However, the prominence of the Salmon Chief in tribal communities is well regarded to this day. The persistence of this central figure in Upper Columbia river Plateau tribes such as the Spokane is remarkable as both Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee Dams have eliminated the traditional salmon runs due to salmon ladders not being included in their construction over half a century ago.

Lost long before the salmon runs was an important artifact for the Spokane Tribe, their Salmon Chief's club. This loss took place in the mid-nineteenth century near Kettle Falls at Fort Colville. The fur trade was bringing native and non-natives together for the first time in a formal relationship of trade and intermarriage. John Keast Lord was a veterinarian and assistant naturalist for the Boundary Survey on the Northwest Coast of the United States from 1858 to 1861. During this time, he collected artifacts and composed a quite detailed and lengthy ethnological document with assistance from Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) officers (Racine 2009, 22–24). It was during this time that Lord acquired a celt that he later donated to the British Museum. Of the seven artifacts attributed to John Keast Lord in the collec-

tion is a celt with the registration number Am 1863, 1104.1. In the museum's internally accessible collection database the description reads:

Composite object consisting of a large lanceolate bifacially flaked chert blade, to which has been attached a handle, wrapped with strips of red stroud cloth, with a loop strap of fur, the handle also decorated with a series of tin or brass bells, a line of transparent, colourless glass beads, three skin thongs, and a band of metal [zinc?] to hold the handle together. As constituted the object is probably supposed to be a dagger.

What is more remarkable than the very detailed description is the provenance that includes an engraving cited in his 1866 publication. Lord describes the celt:

An Illustration attached to this work represents three Spokane Indians, photographed at Fort Colville. The celt made of flint, also figured in the illustration page, the finest mounted specimen at present in the British Museum collection, I obtained from the Indian on the left side of the group. They had no history of it further than that it was of great age, and had been handed down from chief to chief for many generations (Lord 1866, 250).

Darrel Racine, a graduate student from the United States, attempted to find the object in the collection in the early 2000s, but the object was said to be missing.⁴ In September 2012, I found myself at the British Museum's offsite collections facility in northeast London looking at their general Plateau collection that was not on display in the British Museum's main hall. At the time I visited, Museum staff were in the process of packing up their large collections—including the Native North American collection—to move to the main facilities in London, however, the curatorial staff was kind enough to take the time to show me some of the Plateau collections in their care.

In my role as Director of the Plateau Peoples' Web Portal I had contacted the staff about their collections. Several of the tribes involved in the Portal had mentioned that they knew some of their cultural materials were housed at the Museum and I had been alerted to the desire of members of the Spokane tribe to know specifically about this "war club" known in the Lord text as the "celt." Using my basic description and the original reference number from their internal database, the staff were able to locate what I thought was the object in question, but I could not be sure myself. After examining the club and looking at the records we had from the archives, the collections assistant allowed me to photograph the object. Then we waited. Luckily my wireless connection did not fail me and I was able to send both email and text messages with the accompanying photo. It was only a short while before I received a note that indeed that was the Spokane war club. Michael Hollo-

man, the then Director of the Plateau Center for American Indian Studies at Washington State University and the Tribal Liaison for the Northwest Museum of Art and Culture's Plateau Center in Spokane, Washington, noted upon seeing my iPhone picture of the object, "To the people of the Spokane Tribe in Washington State this club is a spirit waiting to be held and acknowledged again as the tribe continues to welcome back its vast cultural heritage for future generations."⁵

Due to British law, however, the collections assistant told me solemnly, the object could not be physically repatriated to the Spokane Tribe. Governed by the British Museum Act of 1963 and a signatory to the 2003 Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums, the British Museum maintains a legal mandate not to repatriate cultural patrimony and further, as Peter-Klaus Schluster argues, within the claims to universality of the museum, refuses "to engage in dialogue around the issue of repatriation."⁶ By not challenging colonial legal fictions that originate from dubious moral and legal scaffolding, the British Museum closes off the possibilities of imagining a new space of shared stewardship and reciprocal exchanges.

The ongoing story of the travels of the Spokane war club is not unique. The archival imagination is driven by a simultaneous nod to and erasure of colonial collecting endeavors that have left an indelible residue on the work of archives as they strive to reimagine their missions apart from that of nation making. Where the colonial archive was a prominent feature in the imagination of nations-in-the-making, archives are *now* part of a larger global narrative driven by technological notions of undeniable connectivity and an expansive notion of curation. Archives play a role in how people from small local communities to massive virtual groups arrange and manage their digital artifacts. The distinctly modern narratives of a hyper-digital era compete with and overshadow the violent and disruptive histories of the work that archives sought to accomplish. By taking on both, the ubiquity of digital narratives and the erasure of colonial pasts, I examine the intersections within the present archival imagination between repatriation and Indigenous sovereignty movements in settler nations.

Archives and museums were established by new and emergent nations as places where official records became anchors for national origin stories and the accepted demise of their first peoples. Simultaneously they created institutional frameworks that bound nations to lands and political structures while erasing the claims of Indigenous peoples. National archives were both physical and ideological manifestations of colonial rule. Part of this was made feasible by the overriding understanding that not only land, but also, as Carla Hesse reminds us in her study of the rise of intellectual property rights, "Knowledge was there for the taking if the grab could be justified by the public good" (2002, 41). The archival imagination, thus, has always been fueled by, and a place for, political work and ideological maneuvering. In the post-colonial imagination archives have become hotbeds for re-imagination and revising of the historical fictions and fantasies that allowed for

the erasure and presumed demise of Indigenous peoples. As places and structures interpolated into social justice agendas, archives, archivists, and archival professionals cannot ignore the changes and challenges brought by these movements. This article analyzes the emergent archival imagination through the lens of sovereignty to expose the place of Indigenous rights, repatriation, and the digital landscape in the practical work of archives on the ground in post-colonial settler states.⁷

The Work of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is an often invoked, yet notoriously misunderstood and misused term in relation to the political, territorial, cultural and economic needs, aspirations and goals of Indigenous peoples living in postcolonial settler states. Joanne Barker notes that the term sovereignty has become so generalized that it stands for multiple projects and practices that confuse historical accuracy and legal agendas to “stand in for all the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples” (2005, 1). Certainly the American legal fiction of the “doctrine of discovery”—deployed across states as a useful way to rationalize and legalize the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and rights—has been useful as a type of imaginary framework for the colonizing elite as they did and continue to imagine the place of Indigenous peoples within their nations.

The “Marshall trilogy” as the Supreme Court cases from the 1830s are known in Indian law, has restricted the sovereignty of Native nations defining them as “domestic dependent nations” residing within the United States. In fact, Barker argues that, “Marshall’s discovery reinvented a sovereignty for Indigenous peoples that was void of any of the associated rights to self-government, territorial integrity, and cultural autonomy that would have been affiliated with it in international law at the time” (2005, 14). Furthermore, legal scholars Wallace Coffey and Rebecca Tsosie argue that the Supreme Court’s recent rulings “reflect its belief that the incorporation of Indian nations into the United States limits their inherent sovereignty” (2001, 192). The legacy of federal Indian policy on the contemporary articulations and enactments of sovereignty cannot be understated. However, as Wallace and Tsosie suggest, Indian nations may be governed by federal Indian Law—“the most byzantine series of statutes, regulations, treaties, and court opinions that any nation has ever possessed” (191)—but they need not be defined by it. Instead they argue that:

It is time for a reappraisal of the tribal sovereignty doctrine—one that is based in the conceptions of sovereignty held by Indian nations and which responds to the challenges that confront Indian nations today. This account of inherent sovereignty should embody cultural sovereignty: that is, the effort of Indian nations and Indian people to exercise their own norms and values in structuring their collective fu-

tures. Inherent sovereignty is not dependent upon any grant, gift, or acknowledgement by the federal government. It preexists the arrival of the European people and the formation of the United States. Cultural sovereignty is inherent in every sense of that word, and it is up to Indian people today to define, assert, protect, and insist upon respect for that right (195–96).

Wallace and Tsosie's critical examination of both the legal and social frameworks of sovereignty make clear that there is no one agreed upon definition or set of tactics, rights, or practices that define sovereignty for Indian nations; rather, the crucial work lies in charting a discussion of the multiple types of sovereignty that can be put to work in the service of these diverse communities. Highlighting the role of cultural sovereignty, they put forward a way to begin that work by moving away from solely political or legal notions of sovereignty. At the same time, Native legal scholar Sam Deloria is wary of clinging too tightly to a vision of sovereignty lodged in a past that never existed "when Indian sovereignty was like Superman in a universe without kryptonite" (2002, 55). For Deloria, looking back at Indigenous forms of governance prior to colonial rule must be done with a pragmatic eye and one that does not fall into absolutes where culture or any other element becomes Native sovereignty's defining characteristic, because in doing so, Deloria worries that Native peoples will be playing into the hands of those who want to undo the rights that already exist for Native nations.

Indeed, many scholars have argued that maintaining the focus on Western notions and legal doctrines of sovereignty only results in further entrenching the very framework that has worked against Indian nations (Singel 2006). That is, by deploying the legal structure of sovereignty born from a colonial impulse, that structure can only serve to weaken Indigenous notions of sovereignty. Wallace and Tsosie punctuate this sentiment: "To the extent that we litigate our right to sovereignty within this legal framework, we have lost the true essence of sovereignty" (2001, 196). In her study of Seminole gaming, Jessica Cattelino extends this line of criticism arguing that, "Indigenous sovereignty unsettles the singularity of sovereignty as it was developed in Europe and its colonies" (2008, 129). Specifically, Cattelino suggests a relational and interdependent view of sovereignty that is embedded in material practices. For these scholars, unhinging sovereignty from its colonial and legal roots can provide a starting point for defining Indigenous self-government and cultural revival that is not the opposite of sovereignty nor grounded in political autonomy, but instead grows from the many and varied types of and structures for tribal governance and cultural production. Expanding on these frameworks of interdependence, I frame sovereignty as both a bundle of rights and a narrative framework for cultural production and practical implementation of cultural obligations by many sets of stakeholders.

To navigate this uneasy and uneven terrain, Wallace and Tsosie suggest that,

“the central challenge of cultural sovereignty is to reach an understanding of sovereignty that is generated from within tribal societies and carries a cultural meaning consistent with those traditions” (2001, 197). Similarly, Wenona Singel argues that, “cultural sovereignty refers to tribes’ efforts to represent their histories and existence using their own terms, and it acknowledges that each Indian nation has its own vision of self-determination as shaped by each tribe’s culture, history, territory, traditions and practices” (2006, 358). One of the key areas in which cultural sovereignty has been imagined, enacted, and practiced in the last twenty-five years has been in archives and museums. Whether through including Indigenous systems of archival management—through co-curation of exhibits, altering display practices to reflect ethical concerns, or by redefining institutional guidelines—Indigenous peoples have not only inserted their voices and practices into collections management and display practice, but they have made collecting institutions one of the frontlines for the articulations of cultural sovereignty.

Imagining return

In March 2011, Nez Perce tribal member and Cultural Resource Manager for the Nez Perce, Josiah Pinkham; WSU’s Plateau Center director Michael Holloman; and I traveled to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC and to their offsite collections in Suitland, Maryland, to view the Nez Perce objects in their possession. After three days of photographing, examining, and handling the collections, it was clear to all of us that these objects were rich sources of tribal history, knowledge and culture (Figure 1).

While the goal was to have digital copies deposited within the Portal—and we have since signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to do so—the emotional connection to the objects was palpable. No one thought, or imagined, that digitally returning and providing culturally appropriate access to the collections would substitute for the physical return of the objects. These were different projects and different sets of discussions. Yet, they were and are connected through the knowledge that is embedded within the cultural materials and the histories of engagement, contact, and travel that reside within them.

These material collections—stored in shelves and full of stories—are part of a history of collection and the ongoing legacy of colonialism that is often misunderstood, erased, or downplayed in the daily activities of museums, archives, and other cultural institutions. As Constance Classen and David Howes suggest, “collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners” (2006, 209). Many archives and museums have signed MOUs with Indigenous communities promising access to and support in retrieving and repatriating materials. In fact, Laura Peers shows that “making collections accessible to source communities has become a major emphasis in museums, and



Figure 1. Josiah Pinkham (Nez Perce) and Michael Holloman (Colville) at the National Museum of the American Indian Archive Center in Suitland, Maryland, March 2012. Photo by Kimberly Christen Withey.

handling objects a standard methodology for reconnection projects” (2013, 138). A new trend in museum practices in relation to Native communities has been this shift to reconnecting with, holding, caring for, and reestablishing relationships with these materials. While Peers emphasizes the power of reconnection through handling the objects, digital technologies have also provided innovative ways to harness the collaborative potentials between collecting institutions and Indigenous communities for the reciprocal curation of collections. Digital return can not offer the physical connection with materials, nor should it be seen as a substitute. Discussing the potential of thoughtful digital projects that are not limited to making and delivering digital copies, Museum Studies scholar Ruth Phillips argues that while virtual repatriation does not and should not replace the need for physical repatriation, it nonetheless helps “restore connections to collections that remain in museums, re-opening channels of knowledge that were closed off by the massive collecting projects of the first museum age and to which community members have a moral right” (2005, 108). In what Phillips calls the second museum age, institutions have become much more flexible and open to varied types of involvement with source communities and the collections they hold. This is perhaps more true now than when Phillips first suggested the shift nearly a decade ago. While collaboration should never

assume a level playing field and taking into account uneven power relations is central to what I am suggesting here, non-Indigenous collecting institutions in the US, Canada, and Australia, have shown both in policy and in practice that they are willing and open to diverse ways of dealing with, managing, displaying, and caring for Indigenous collections.

When only a small fraction of a museum's holding are on display at any given time and whereas archival collections sit for decades without being processed due to institutional constraints, it seems more difficult to argue that many of these collections would not be better off in hands of the source communities who are asking for their return. If a community—through their representative bodies—asks for the return of certain items, they may at the same time decide that portions of a collection should or would be better cared for by an outside institution. As Rosemary Coombe suggests, “Although repatriation of objects is one course of action, recognizing guardianship may actually facilitate the keeping of cultural properties in public museums and enhance their use and display” (2009, 401). The key is to open a dialogue and promote collaboration necessary to determine the best scenario for communities on a case-by-case basis. Some communities will choose—out of necessity or circumstance— not to have objects returned physically and digital surrogates may instead be a viable and hopeful option. These are not either-or scenarios.

Repatriation and NAGPRA: Native American Graves and Repatriation Act, 1990

The passage of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 was the culmination of decades of activism on the part of Native peoples in the Americas. The twenty-plus years since its passage have seen the active work of repatriation take effect in ways that make clear that the return of cultural and religious objects is part of a larger set of relationships that need to be both mended and forged between Native communities and collecting institutions. NAGPRA paved the way for museums to create new types of relationships, curation, and display practices that connect directly to the stated wishes of Native Americans in the United States. As Rebecca Tsosie argues, “NAGPRA is intended to rectify an acknowledged history of injustice in which Native American graves were looted, sacred objects appropriated, and Native American bodies were desecrated, leading to the possession of thousands of human remains by federal agencies and museum” (2012, 815).

Even after years of being in the back rooms, basements, and storerooms of museums, I am still taken aback by the somewhat ragged and ramshackle “homes” provided for the cultural materials of communities all over the world. When I think about the arguments made by some curators and archivists that these collections are better off in the hands of large institutions where they can be preserved properly, it rubs up against the realities of small and shrinking budgets, few staff, and priorities that often see small ethnological collections sitting unopened or accessioned for

decades. This is not to suggest malice or intentional neglect on anyone's part. These types of arguments for collections staying within national/colonial institutions for "practical" reasons, however, brings divergent understandings of the necessary care for and preservation of these materials to the fore, and opens debates about repatriation to the relative status of the majority of objects in archival and museum collections. Within this context Rosemary Coombe suggests that,

NAGPRA in 1990 was but one of many acknowledgements of the rights of descendant communities that practitioners have come to recognize. Requests for the return of artifacts, historic photographs, and ethnographic information have become common. Ethical issues of accountability and professional responsibility now go beyond issues of stewardship... to encompass responsibilities for the welfare and empowerment of those descendant communities...(2009, 399)

While legislation put repatriation into motion, it has also opened up questions about the varied understandings of, and contexts for, the return of cultural objects and the ethical challenges that stem from a seemingly straightforward process.

Tribal nations in the United States that make claims for repatriation while sharing similar histories of colonialism, are likely to have diverse sets of cultural needs as well as community-driven desires for specific sets of return. In addition, only federally recognized tribes may apply and as Rebecca Tsosie documents, the issue of "culturally unidentifiable" remains and cultural objects often derails repatriation efforts, privileges Western scientific narratives and forms of evidence, and reinforces the arbitrary and violent borders and identities constructed through U.S. colonialism (2012). In this context, Debra Harry and others have argued for the inclusion of ethical frameworks in legal and political documents and research (Harry 2009; Reardon and TallBear 2012). In the global context, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Article 31:1 states that:

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.⁸

This set of rights does not in any way preclude or guard against partnerships, collaboration, and co-curation of collections. Instead, the article seeks to solidify the

same sets of options for Indigenous peoples to manage, share, and protect heritage materials as others. The extension of these rights and obligations, of course, is complicated by a Western legal corpus that is hostile to the needs and histories of Indigenous communities (Anderson 2009, Riley 2005). As a starting point, however, Article 31:1 can and should frame the on-going negotiations between collecting institutions and the source communities whose collections they hold. There will be a range of practices, compromises, and collaborative engagements that stem from the basic recognition that the ownership, care, and stewardship of these cultural materials should involve a reappraisal of the collections' past and a recognition of future uses and needs that may entail some form of return—whether it is by physical, digital, temporary, or permanent. In fact, as Michael Brown notes, what is rarely discussed are the successful and ongoing cases of “joint-stewardship” of objects that result in building “relations of trust with Indigenous people and enliven museums by drawing them into everyday Native life in ways never before imagined” (Brown 2009, 151). This shift away from notions of collecting to *caring and stewarding* material culture has, as Brown suggests, moved museum practice to a focus on relationship building through advisory boards, joint display creation, and collaborative curation. Moving the emphasis from a form of dispossession is one step in undoing the legacies of the colonial collecting enterprise.

There is anecdotal as well as documented evidence from anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and linguists that individual community-led, collaborative digital repatriation projects have enabled traditions to be revitalized, language programs to grow, and new knowledge to be created based on community input surrounding these objects' return. For example, Ruth Phillips, director of the Great Lakes Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures, shows how digitally repatriated objects inserted into a shared relational database at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology have led to new museum classification systems and taxonomies based on input from tribal elders (Phillips 2008). Working with the Maasai on a cultural heritage project, Wend Wendland, Deputy Director of the Global Issues (Traditional Knowledge) Division at WIPO, quickly found that what the Maasai wanted was a digital archive that would allow them to adapt their own property system to that of outsiders interested in their cultural materials. To the Maasai, repatriating digital objects was less important than being able to control how those objects would be used in the future both internally and externally (Wendland, 2005). Dr. Aron Crowell, the Alaska Director of the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center, has shown how their long-term program, “Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage,” has dovetailed with an intense interest in Native language revitalization in Alaskan Inuit communities. Using an interactive website to collect hundreds of hours of Native Alaskan knowledge in both English and local languages the Arctic Studies program is working with community members and existing educational programs to “adapt museum programs to support this community priority” (2009, 2).⁹ Working with Indigenous communities, these scholars have

employed collections-based return practices in partnership with communities in order to find new and innovative ways to test and shape the practices of knowledge creation and revitalization in its many forms. These examples are part of a more global phenomenon effecting collecting, return, and display practices in archives, museums, and libraries. As Rosemary Coombe observes, “New understandings of heritage have emerged both from a backlash against the professionalization of the field of cultural heritage management and from the challenges of minorities and Indigenous peoples to monolithic narratives of national history and identity that negatively affect their representations and self-understandings” (2009, 397).

Digital Repatriation: Beyond Digitization and Exchange

The notion of “digital return” that I advance here is something more than the digitization and exchange of materials, which is fairly commonplace and inexpensive. I use digital return instead as an umbrella term to include many types of return practices, but specifically as related to Indigenous cultural heritage materials found within collecting institutions with colonial pasts. In doing so, I am signaling the practice of digital repatriation (Bell, Christen, Turin 2013). I use the term repatriation consciously and purposefully to denote a set of political and cultural practices that go further than just digitizing materials and giving those digitized versions back to source communities. The physical repatriation of Indigenous cultural materials in the United States and Canada specifically, but in most settler nations, is a political act that recognizes the injustices of colonial endeavors and promotes a process that values Indigenous social systems and cultural protocols concerning the handling of human remains and sacred objects.

Building from this repatriation framework then, I suggest that digital repatriation *can be a process* of returning digital materials that takes seriously the already-existing ethical systems of knowledge circulation and sociality within Indigenous communities and understands that digital materials can and often do have similar political, emotional and cultural effects as the return of physical objects. This type of repatriation is not meant to be inclusive of all types of repatriation, nor does it discount other forms of return such as “knowledge repatriation” (Krpmotich and Peers 2013). One does not need to insist that repatriation fits all digital projects. Not all return projects should be thought of or defined as repatriation; but for those that are, it is critical to understand the political situations and historic consciousness that ignites such work.

As we look to the ways we might imagine the future of archives, archival practices, and collections management, we not only need to shed the colonial legacies that continue to bind physical archives and other collecting institutions to maintain significant control over Indigenous patrimony, but also, and equally important, we must challenge the contemporary narratives that surround the digital era that whilst

claiming to be progressive and democratic, actually promote Western values and ethical systems of openness, access, and preservation that do not align with many Indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage management systems and practices (Buri 2009, Srinivasan et al 2010). How then, might digital repatriation function in or reshape the archival imagination to include notions of archival sovereignty and what might this look like on the ground? How is cultural sovereignty enacted through the archives and through the return of digital materials to Indigenous archives? How do can collections be managed, cared for and displayed in ways that remap and reframe sovereignty?

A Safe Keeping Place: Mukurtu CMS and Musqueam Archives

In March 2013, several years after I had first been to the Musqueam Indian Band offices just outside Vancouver, Canada and met their archivist, Jason Woolman, I was asked to discuss the role of Mukurtu CMS (<http://www.mukurtu.org>) as an archival option for the Musqueam Indian Band. Mukurtu CMS is a free and open source community archive platform and content management system. Mukurtu began as a grassroots effort between myself and several members of the Warumungu Aboriginal community in Central Australia, as part of the planning and production of the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Culture Centre (Christen 2007, 2009, 2012). Mukurtu—"a safe keeping place"—was created to solve a particular problem about how to define access to digital collections based on their own cultural protocols for the circulation and use of cultural materials and the knowledge embedded within the objects and the people who bring that knowledge to life. Not all objects can or should be seen by everyone. Not all knowledge is open to the public. It was the Warumungu emphasis on relational, respectful, and reciprocal understandings of knowledge circulation and the enactment of these protocols through relationships and obligations that drove the creation of the digital archive system. We needed a way to make the digital bend to the cultural needs of the community.

After years of development, Mukurtu CMS is now a free and open source platform that allows any community (however defined) to place their protocols for access and circulation at the center of the management and preservation of their digital materials.¹⁰ Technology is not the revolutionary force here. Technology won't save or revive languages or cultures, it won't ensure sovereignty is enacted and it won't bring objects home, but empowering people to create their own digital systems of and for cultural preservation and production can alter the digital as well as the social terrain of *return*.

Working directly with the Musqueam Indian Band's Treaty, Lands, and Resources office (MIB-TLR), I made a presentation to the Council of the Musqueam Indian Band about the history of Mukurtu CMS as a cultural protocol-based, community-driven archival platform and specifically the role that Mukurtu CMS might

play in advancing Musqueam goals of maintaining their own internal cultural values and structures while simultaneously taking advantage of the agility of the digital technologies that powered Mukurtu CMS. In particular, the MIB-TLR archives team and Council were keen to know more about its relationship to key aspects of their community development goals including: protocol-based access to resources, respect for Musqueam structures and relationships, managing the Musqueam library and archives, and culturally relevant mapping. Members of their staff had been working through integrating local cultural protocols into all of their projects for years. Mukurtu CMS was another *tool* that might allow them to implement cultural and social protocols that exist in Musqueam life and governance. In fact, this was the balance we sought as a team for the Mukurtu platform itself from its inception: promoting culturally relevant dynamics while allowing for flexibility and dynamism of structure.

For the Musqueam, Mukurtu CMS is used for archiving and accessing both their internal Band ethnographic and archeological collections and displaying external exhibits with their own and digitally repatriated materials for and with multiple publics. What Mukurtu CMS allows the Musqueam archives team to do was define levels of sharing that dovetailed with their offline protocols, values, and practices for knowledge circulation and acquisition.

A month after my second presentation to the Band Council, I met again with the Treaties, Lands, and Resources group. It was clear that the team saw an engagement with Mukurtu CMS as part of both the Musqueam Indian Band's goals and their unit's specific charter. The MIB-TLR's mission includes: 1) mapping and record keeping; 2) managing the Musqueam Library and Archives; 3) conducting archaeological and other research; 4) Community planning; and 4) Liaising with the neighboring University of British Columbia, including the UBC Museum of Anthropology, on issues of education, language, and culture. The Musqueam have been, and continue to be, hesitant to share knowledge publicly due to both their own system of values encouraging proper use and access to cultural knowledge according to community protocols and humility, as well as, the local colonial history of removal of Indigenous knowledge and resources with neither prior consultation nor consent and used for the benefits of non-band members.

As our meetings and discussions progressed it was clear that, over time, a lack of knowledge about Musqueam culture and history by the non-First Nations public and government has had negative effects on the community and its members throughout the area. The members of the MIB-TLR saw that their resources could be used to change this situation. In our second meeting, Leona Sparrow, Musqueam community member and the Director of the Treaty, Lands, and Resources department, said that it was important for Musqueam to explain some of their teachings to outsiders, but to do so in ways that were culturally appropriate. In fact, she made it clear that if this emphasis on educating the non-Musqueam public was to effectively serve the MIB-TLR's mission to, first, care for the well-being of Musqueam as

a community and, second, to improve its relationships with outside communities and partners, the sharing and education has to be carried out in accordance with the appropriate cultural protocols.

q'wal'təl': A Time For Forgiveness

Early in 2013, our partnership was formally approved by the Musqueam Band Council and we embarked on a project to leverage the Mukurtu CMS platform to meet the archival needs of the Musqueam Indian Band and produce a new “exhibit” feature that will allow them to create dynamic, map-based exhibits using their own and other museums’ collections that would, in turn, create layered narratives. The Musqueam community members would be able to access other collections using a “feeds” function within Mukurtu CMS so that, for example, if the UBC Museum of Anthropology had digital collections from Musqueam these items could be “pulled” into the Musqueam instance of Mukurtu, narrated, mapped, and curated for digital display. These collections would be enhanced by Musqueam voices narrating and defining their cultural materials, thereby undoing the role of the outside expert. With Musqueam voices at the center, it is clear that they are the experts; their narrations and explanations are not relegated to comments, but instead are embedded within the metadata. The exhibit feature will further mirror their sense of community obligations and protocols by allowing for community-driven content and access to the materials. Wanting to exhibit a past for which they are fiercely proud and to promote a future in which education and sharing are defined by Musqueam goals and protocols, our development was less of technical challenge than one of making sure we were following the first protocol for engagement with Musqueam people: *listen* (Musqueam 2006, 24). We held many meetings, community gatherings, conference calls, and other sessions during which the goal was for us to listen and learn about Musqueam culture and values.

Key to our development of the archival, exhibit, and curatorial platform for the Musqueam, then, was to understand their sense of themselves, their goals, and their plans.

Musqueam culture today is a blend of the traditional and the modern. We are not a people living out of time, nor a relic of the past encapsulated in history. Like any other Nation, we are a living, breathing people whose culture continues to adapt and grow; we bring forth a proud heritage as we navigate the changes to our surroundings. The values of our ancestors are still our values today. We are keepers of the river, keepers of the lands and waters that continue to sustain us. We intend to care for our territory so that our future generations can enjoy the abundance of our predecessors. Perhaps more than ever we value com-

munity. Losing so many of our population and being forced to live on a small piece of our land has brought our people close together, and today we continue to exist as a tight-knit community. We still see ourselves as warriors, strong in our independence, proud of our heritage. We are generous. In the manner we have been taught, we want to share our stories, our culture and our resources and to restore harmony and balance with the outside world. And we value education as a means to a brighter future for our young people (2006, 15).

Through their internal and externally forged partnerships and projects, the Musqueam emphasize maintaining a balance with tradition and modernity; reaching out and maintaining cultural protocols; educating others and reviving their internal structures. Holding to these values opens them to an array of projects that promote a Musqueam view that is neither homogenous nor stagnant. While their own sovereignty is not in question here, we can see the many ways in which sovereignty is enacted through different sets of museum, archive, and exhibition practices and the policies that enable them—both internally and externally through new collaborations.

As our conversations continued, our Mukurtu team worked with the MIB-TLR members and in conversation with some overriding questions posed by the Fetzer Institute who supported the project from its inception.¹¹ The Fetzer Institute funds projects globally as part of their mission to promote love and healing. In this case, they were interested to see how First Nations communities might use technology to further their own goals concerning education, reconciliation, and the public. In fact, as the Fetzer program officer Gillian Gonda explained to us, Fetzer does not have one notion of what love, forgiveness, or reconciliation look like, but instead is interested in seeing how local constituencies define, enact, and transform such ideals. It was Leona Sparrow, who offered the phrase, “a time for forgiveness” to guide the project and to name the exhibit. Musqueam Elder Larry Grant provided the Musqueam terms *qʷalʷəlʷ* for the phrase linking understanding and forgiveness. Grant said that the idea of “understanding” and the process of “coming to an understanding” may be closer to what is being put into practice and experienced at Musqueam presently. Musqueam community member and MIB-TLR Researcher and Community Outreach Manager, Terry Point, took this further and made the point that the idea of “forgiveness” cannot be separated from “understanding.” He further noted that ideas associated with “forgiveness” change over time.¹² Presently in Canada, Truth and Reconciliation efforts nationally have engaged the public and First Nations communities with the practical meanings of past wrongs and present actions. Keeping this in mind, Musqueam Archivist Jason Woolman reminded us that we should continue to reflect on the Hənq̓əminəm concepts and Musqueam *snəwəyel* (teachings) that resonate with the English terms “love” and “forgiveness” throughout the project.

At our project and exhibit design kickoff meeting at the Musqueam Cul-

tural Education Centre in May 2013, it was clear that the community representatives wanted to highlight both the extension of Musqueam culture in public spaces through specific artwork and at the same time provide the missing context and educational materials that would make their voices and priorities central. In fact, Musqueam art can be found throughout Vancouver. Manhole covers with Musqueam imprints, street signs designed with Musqueam icons and language, and sculptures at Stanley Park all designed by Musqueam artists could easily go overlooked in the crowded public spaces of the city. Currently there is no central source that showcases Musqueam cultural art installations. Over a series of meetings the project coalesced around the idea of creating an exhibit of Musqueam public art that pulled from archival sources that would be housed in Mukurtu and that was embedded in a map interface so that the very notion of “public space” would be reimaged and narrated by Musqueam art and voices.

It was during this visit that Leona Sparrow addressed the key issue of educating the public to Musqueam points of view, frameworks, and histories. She remarked that the Musqueam have been hesitant to share knowledge publicly both because of their own system of values encouraging proper use and access to cultural knowledge according to community protocols and humility and importantly because of the violent and disruptive local colonial history of removal of Musqueam knowledge and resources without consent. However, she went on to clarify that as a community they had decided that, since over time a lack of knowledge about Musqueam culture and history has had negative effects on the community and its members, they now feel that it is important for Musqueam to prepare itself to share more than it has in the past, but to do so with the assurance that this sharing will be done in a culturally appropriate way. To that end, Leona shared what her elders had taught her: “You forgive those who do not know any better.” Within this context, the challenge for Musqueam, according to Sparrow, was to provide that knowledge and then the onus would be on others to act accordingly. In some ways it is, of course, still a risk; one that the Musqueam are primed to take and make their own.

Anthropologist Kristin Dowell suggests that placing Aboriginal public art in highly visited areas inscribes an “Aboriginal presence on the urban landscape of Vancouver.” Further, Dowell argues that this presence is part of the wider frame of sovereignty that includes media production. For Dowell “visual sovereignty” is the “articulation of Aboriginal peoples’ distinctive cultural traditions, political status and collective identities through aesthetic and cinematic means” (2013, 2). Dowell’s definition gives us a place to open the concept of sovereignty to visual media—not just the products, but also and as significantly, the production, the processes, and the cultural work that goes into creating visual media. Furthering this, I suggest that the work of digital repatriation falls under the arc of sovereignty as it defines a new space of engagement, interaction, and community-making between many sets of stakeholders. Digital repatriation is, and can be, an avenue for seeing the expanse of sovereignty practices within larger commitments to engagement and

collaboration—ones that meaningfully start from a place of equality and respect. It may be easy to discount collaborations, especially ones defined through the creation and/or exchange of the bits and bytes that make up digital materials and platforms. Here, though, I am suggesting that the digital is the *mode* through which political, social, and cultural expressions of sovereignty are made. The many acts that create digital repatriation are, and should be, distinct from the repatriation of materials and/or human remains. However, there is no reason to discount the process of digital repatriation's potential to function within sovereignty's wake as not just expressions of community self-determination and political autonomy, but as a marker of sovereignty's reciprocal and relational forms.

Making/Taking Space: Protocols for Design and Display

Musqueam people have been at the forefront of reclaiming and reframing public spaces—specifically museum and archival spaces throughout Vancouver. The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver is steeped with Musqueam objects; and, even more importantly, after a major reconstruction project that began in 2001, its design and structure are informed by a Musqueam sensibility and relationship to place and to Musqueam notions of display, access, and visibility. Today, Musqueam carvings flank the remodeled building and inside the Museum permanent displays model the visual access protocols of the Musqueam. Observing the changes, Leona Sparrow notes that, “It is encouraging to see over the past few years...an increased presence of Musqueam culture and people within the Museum of Anthropology, which has been a repository of cultural wealth. Museums have the obligation to bring that cultural information back to the community where it originated” (Rowley, 2013: 24). When Terry Point took us on a tour of the exhibits at the MOA he showed us a case that appeared at first glance to be empty (Figure 2). Terry told us that, looking closely *at an item*, one sees the outline of an image *but in the image* was a sacred object. This visual trick played by the exhibit—seeing, but not seeing an object—could frustrate the visual cues expected by museum goers, or, as Terry suggested, it could lead visitors to evaluate their own expectations of museum displays, sacred objects and the knowledge that circulates in and around and within these materials—the “belongings,” as Terry noted Musqueam refer to them.

The shadow display was created at the request of Musqueam people due to the sacred nature of the object. Instead of having an empty display case or no display at all, the shadow of the object draws visitors' attention. The accompanying display text, then fills in the blanks informing viewers not just about the object, but more importantly from a Musqueam perspective, about the viewing protocols for such items. The accompanying text highlights this balance between modes of sharing cultural images and objects and enacting cultural protocols:



Figure 2. Terry Point (Musqueam) explains the Coast Salish display at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, to Michael Ashley and the rest of the Mukurtu team, Vancouver, BC, April 2013. Photo by Kimberly Christen Withey.

Coast Salish spirituality is intensely personal and private. Spiritual knowledge and rights are often passed along family lines. Community members have different feelings regarding public access to spiritual objects and their images. For some it is acceptable to exhibit their spirituality, while others remain strongly opposed to such displays. With respect to these differences, we have removed spiritual objects from view. It is important to acknowledge that the Coast Salish still practice their traditional spirituality in the privacy of their own communities (Figures 3 and 4).

The text not only calls attention to the living traditions and protocols that define actions and obligations within the community, it also shows that the First Nations communities are not homogenous and that the Museum's choice is to respect those differences, internally and externally. Like other collecting institutions worldwide, the Museum of Anthropology at UBC has made a conscious effort to embed Indigenous practices into their curatorial strategies, thus making the museum space as

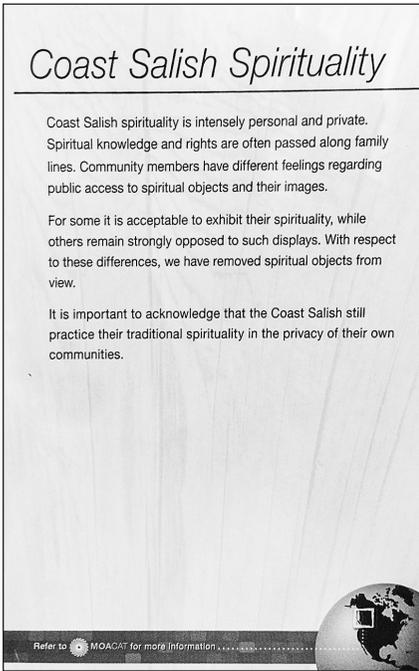


Figure 3. Caption on the Coast Salish display at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, April 2013. Photo by Michael Ashley.



Figure 4. "Shadow" image display of the Coast Salish at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, April 2013. Photo by Michael Ashley.

much about viewing cultural objects as enacting and putting into practice the very values and knowledge within those material objects.

The *q^val'təl': a time for forgiveness* project aims to create a dynamic digital space and platform for the Musqueam display of their public art (Figure 5). The virtual exhibit will bring together not just images of the art but interviews with the artists, new uses of the materials in various settings, historic photos, aerial photos of the area that show the change of the space over time, comments and community made audio and video that relate to and enhance the original art and a revolving and endlessly updatable space for community narration. This space—while ever changing and open-ended—will only be one part of our engagement. By creating a new feature within Mukurtu CMS for this project, the platform will allow the Musqueam (and any community who uses Mukurtu) to continue to grow the connections between their archival collections, newly generated content, and digital materials from other collections or donors. These new connections can be mapped in the virtual space, linked to new narratives or exhibits, made publically visible or only for internal circulation, or used for curriculum and language revival. The exhibit feature will provide an ongoing space for the community creation of visual displays based around their own decisions and frameworks for sharing. Further, the MIB will use Mukurtu's already existing protocol-driven access and viewing capabilities to archive and make accessible to their community various archaeological and library catalogues. Thus, *open*, *sharing*, and *circulating* take on a new resonance in this framework where Musqueam categories, cultural protocols, and families define the ways in which historic documents will travel and be seen.

Creating an archival space as one that hinges on relationships, interaction, and outreach, the Musqueam team are pushing the boundaries of the archival imagination, opening it to the fluencies and fluctuations of varied histories, cultural understandings and ethical frameworks for viewing and being viewed. The time for forgiveness comes at a time when reconciliation is in the spotlight in Canada through the Truth and Reconciliation commission sponsoring national events across Canada and in Vancouver overlapping with our work on this project.¹³ Leona Sparrow reminded us all that this exhibit would be a test to see if those who have not learned and do not know, make the effort to engage, to listen, to respect what they see and do not see. She taught us that she can forgive those who do not know, but once they know, they then have the responsibility to act accordingly. Here sovereignty is not only, or even mainly, a legal framework, but it is the first step in understanding and placing historically uneven relationships on an equal footing. Her words remind us that the obligations we have and the interactions made within and between communities place the notion of sovereignty within a set of dialogues that cannot be encompassed by Western legal frames or histories of colonial collection. Instead, the Musqueam project *q^val'təl': a time for forgiveness* places the onus on people to make sovereignty matter.



Figure 5. A mock up of the q'wal'təl': a time for forgiveness digital exhibit produced by the Mukurtu development team from the Center for Digital Archaeology for Aboriginal Day at Musqueam in June 2013.

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Notes

1. See Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 123.
2. Quoted in Hibbert (1998/1999) 434. [Need fuller citation from author]
3. "HistoryLink: The Free Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History," *Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation* http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=7577, accessed October 12, 2013.
4. Personal communication email message. September 19, 2012.
5. Personal communication, email message, September 21, 2012.
6. British Museum Act 1963, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/PDF/BM1963Act.pdf> and The

Treasures of World Culture in the Public Museum, Peter-Klaus Schuster, <http://committeeof-culturalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/CCP-WebLibrary-Museums-ICOM-Universal-Museums.pdf>

7. I focus on sovereignty in legal terms mainly in the United States and in a more cursory way in Canada, in order to ground the article within the legal areas of my own collaborative archival work. I discuss sovereignty more generally in other publications (Christen 2009).
8. United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Accessed October 11, 2013, <http://undesadspd.org/IndigenousPeoples.aspx>.
9. Alaska Native Collections: Sharing Knowledge website, <http://alaska.si.edu/>.
10. Mukurtu CMS has been developed in part by funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute for Museum and Library Studies. Mukurtu CMS is collaboratively managed by teams at Washington State University, the Center for Digital Archaeology, and with direct input by the communities who use the platform. See <http://www.mukurtu.org>.
11. The project is funded in part by the Fetzer Institute <http://www.fetzer.org> and is being collaboratively produced by the Musqueam, Mukurtu CMS and Center for Digital Archaeology <http://www.codifi.info/teams>.
12. Personal communication and Internal project report (on file with author) October 2, 2013.
13. British Columbia Reconciliation Week September 16–22, 2013. Accessed October 12, 2013, <http://www.myrobust.com/websites/vancouver/index.php?p=719>.

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