

# RELATIONSHIPS, NOT RECORDS

## Digital Heritage and the Ethics of Sharing Indigenous Knowledge Online

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Archive: from Gk. *ta arkheia* “public records,” pl. of *arkheion* “town hall, public building,” from *arkhe* “government,” literally “beginning, origin, first place,” from Gk. *arkhon* “ruler, commander, chief, captain,” present participle of *arkhein* “be the first,” also “to rule” (Online Etymology Dictionary 2001–17)

The etymological roots of the term *archive* highlight the relationship between archives, state institutions, and public policies. The origins of modern archives are intimately linked to colonial logics of vanishing races, imperial projects of collection, and colonial nation-making strategies. Colonial expeditions displayed national treasures collected from around the world and also standardized knowledge based on their own interpretations and uses of those materials. Consider the state-sponsored anthropologists taking photographs of Indigenous peoples’ rituals or artifacts; or, the botanist traveling with colonial expeditions, documenting and collecting flora and fauna along with Indigenous names and uses for them; or, the missionaries simultaneously documenting Indigenous languages and defining the “savage” religious practices of Indigenous peoples. The archive was simultaneously a physical place to store Indigenous materials and a political representation of policies of displacement and destruction of Indigenous cultural practices, languages, and ways of life.

Archives are physical reminders of colonial practices that once promoted the exclusion of minority and subaltern voices (Foote 1990; Mifflin 2009). While archives grapple with this history and archivists make strides in creating a new basis for archival work, archives still often engender ambivalent feelings among Indigenous peoples who see them as testaments to the hyper-surveillance of their lives and marginal status in the nations in which they live as well as potential sources for recovering lost histories, reconnecting with family members, and finding evidence of their legal claims to land and resources. Collected, collated, and curated for a non-Indigenous audience and used to build cases for territorial dispossession and

historical erasure, the documents, maps, ledgers, photos, and ephemera in modern archives are simultaneously part of the colonial past and an anchor for present reconfigurations of history, memory, identity, and sovereignty. The materials collected can be, and indeed are being, repurposed for uses not originally intended or desired.

Archives have always been home to humanists; they are places where voices are recovered from long quiet pages. Marginal notes inspire new historical insights, and government documents unearth untold national trajectories. Archives inspire. They can also silence by directing viewers to partial or incomplete records or records compiled from one perspective. Archival standards provide categories for searching, subject headings for linking materials, and classification systems for arranging materials, all defined through dominant western histories and logics. Archivists choose what to accept, accession, describe, catalogue, and document. These are not neutral or nonbiased acts. Defining collections, annotating items, and providing finding aids all require interpretive work and choices about what gets included and what gets left out. Interpretation does not necessarily mean that a bias results in erasure, but it does leave archival practices open to cultural criticism and the creation of multiple sets of records to fully define histories of material.

Physical documents detailing the attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples remain, at least selectively, open in archives. But these repositories have often been “largely inaccessible to indigenous owners” (Dyson & Hendriks 2007: xvi). Physical distances, educational and linguistic barriers, and high levels of poverty have all made archives unapproachable places for Indigenous communities, whose cultural materials and institutional histories are preserved within them. In the last 30 years, Indigenous activism has spread to archives, and there has been a simultaneous growth of Indigenous-run archives on Indigenous lands and the insertion of Indigenous systems of knowledge production and information management into archival policies and practices (Christen 2011; O’Neal 2015). Many archives in Australia, for example, now offer services for Indigenous community members to aid in finding relatives who were part of the Stolen Generation (e.g., children taken by the government to boarding schools). The Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies provides a range of archival policies geared toward Aboriginal cultural values—keeping culturally sensitive materials from public view and requiring community permissions to access some sacred materials (Nakata 2005). Similarly, in the United States, the First Archivists Circle created the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials as a set of guidelines for non-Native archivists to consult during the process of archiving Native materials to ensure cultural values and ethical concerns are addressed at all steps of the archiving process, from acquisition to cataloguing (O’Neal 2014). Jeffrey Mifflin suggests that:

There is no real neutrality in either historical research or archival science. Mediation inevitably occurs when researchers come to an archival repository to study materials. Access policies, the level of detail and characteristics of finding aids, the physical condition or format of materials, the helpfulness of staff, and the specialized insights of archivists are all variables. How should this affect archivists who administer Native American or other indigenous collections? There are no ready answers, and perhaps the most honest and sensitive approach would be to confer with representatives of the cultures most affected before devising (or revising) policies and procedures.

(Mifflin 2009: 381)

Taken together, there is a quickly emerging consensus around these trends in archival practices that are becoming normalized as best practices for handling Indigenous materials in

all types of repositories and collecting institutions. As old practices shift, it is helpful to examine how new ones are planned, defined, and put into action, as well as what they signal in terms of our academic and ethical values.

### **Cultural Checks: Digital Heritage Stewardship**

Digital technologies have made new types of access and modes of curation possible and provide one avenue for examining archival openness, access policies, and how values are embedded in archival acts. Over the last 10 years—with digital tools and platforms that rely on and privilege user-generated content and curation growing in popularity—curation as imagined within the digital landscape has been linked to outward-facing export processes and practices. Curation at its base is about organizing a set of materials in a meaningful way. Where once curation was seen as the job of archivists, librarians, or museum professionals, it is now more commonly seen as a creative act that anyone can perform. In fact, social media platforms encourage it; we are prompted to curate our own content—photos, scanned images, audio clips, video files—to engage with friends, share memories with family, or promote ourselves to potential employers or partners. The read/write or import/export model of content curation is undone through these emergent practices of digital curation, where viewing, displaying, arranging, and remixing content become more visible and saving or storing becomes less visible. In 2014, *every 60 seconds* there were 120 hours of video uploaded to YouTube, 1380 blog posts published on Wordpress blogs, 41,000 photos uploaded to Instagram, and 3.3 million Facebook posts. Each of these could be considered an act of digital curation (CLT 2014). With all this content, curation becomes a more everyday act, one worthy of understanding and exploration for what it reveals as well as what it may conceal.

Typical models of digital curation follow a framework of (1) getting/finding, (2) arranging, and (3) sharing content. One need only Google “digital curation” to find a wealth of graphics showing various workflow scenarios. Even detailed workflows all start with finding or getting content. The workflows suggest a process that begins with a notion of discovery that replays a colonial collecting paradigm, where content is imagined as unhinged from peoples and cultures and free for the taking (Christen 2012; Hennessy 2013). One can quite easily get content from a Google image search, scrape it from a website, or download it from an academic digital archive. The process is imagined as a neutral act—one of taking something that is already offered up for consumption. The term “data mining” offers a telling example of how colonial legacies of collecting physical materials from local places and peoples are grafted onto digital content. Content is imagined as open, reusable, and unhinged from communities, individuals, or families who may have intimate ties to the materials.

Once content is found, the process of curation can take on many meanings. In the current technical landscapes, curation may mean a playful remix of images and sound to mock a world leader or an ironic arrangement of videos and text to make a social intervention. Or, it could simply gesture to making lolcat GIFs. In any case, curation implies a conscious effort to put materials in relation to one another to form something new—whether that be for commercial, academic, entertainment, or other purposes. This process—as generally imagined—does not necessarily involve providing cultural, historical, or political context for collections in relation to local communities of origin. Additionally, generally accepted approaches include academic research practices that have not been historically open to subaltern voices, and popular trends in digital curation do not suggest an ethical commitment to maintaining the integrity of collections or providing the familial or community-based links to and narratives of these items.

One of the foundations of archival practices is providing metadata, “information about information,” for all materials. In physical archives, this once meant accession documents, card catalogues, finding aids for entire collections (brief summaries with larger chunks of information), and item level metadata such as date, creator, publisher, subject, and a unique identifier (an alphanumeric string assigned to each item). While metadata has often been viewed as neutral information (“facts”), its status has been re-evaluated, showing that the creation of metadata, like other forms of information, is influenced by social, cultural, and political values and norms. The notion of a single creator or author of a work is prime example. In western settings (and legal contexts) the author is seen as the sole creator of a work, and legal as well as financial rights may be assigned to that person. In many Indigenous communities, however, the notion of a single creator of a song or author of a narrative is undone by value placed on community production, ancestral creation of stories, or other forms of cultural and artistic content. A design on a Zuni mask, for example, may belong to one family or clan, and the songs associated with its performance may belong to another. No one person can or would assert authorship or ownership of these materials (Torsen & Anderson 2010).

Finally, in normative workflows for digital curation, sharing with an unidentified public across multiple platforms is presumed to be not only a best practice but also a *de facto* public good. Current social media platforms and online display tools work across one another so that sharing may mean a post on Facebook, a collage on Instagram, 140 characters on Twitter, an online exhibit, or a multimodal book display. The possibilities for curation have been extended through digital tools that allow for both weaving together many types of digital objects in one space and the connections one can make across the digital landscape. While openness may seem to be a neutral and homogenous term and standard for access, it is in fact a culturally determined and political act. Making digital content open to all, to do with what they will without question, is very rarely what proponents of open access mean.

Access and openness are almost always more complicated, more nuanced, and conditional. If we take away the utopian allure of openness and look at how people share, access, and circulate information, then we see a range of ways to do so, and only very few are oppressive or opportunistic. If we take away the extremes, then we see that sharing content and defining access can relate to historical circumstances, political realities, personal safety, community growth, and varied educational needs. This basic model of curation can be expanded for the sake of sustainability, preservation, and discoverability of metadata, but its foundation in practices of discovery or collection implies unfettered access as the norm and description and sharing without cultural, historical, or political context (Phillips 2005; Lonetree 2012).

Indigenous cultural production in archiving and curation provides a counterbalance to these workflows and gives us different models for sharing, arranging, and circulating knowledge. In Australia, Aboriginal practices of masking, deleting, and hiding images, objects, and artifacts are quite common. In museum exhibits, online archives, and virtual exhibits, there are often warnings that these physical or virtual spaces contain images and names of deceased people—for example, the National Museum of Australia may “cause sadness and distress to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.” In Vancouver, Canada, the Musqueam Indian Band’s online place name archive requires visitors to accept certain terms for viewing Musqueam places and hearing Musqueam stories and the *hən̓q̓əmi̓n̓əm̓* language. Only upon accepting these terms, which include being “respectful” and “not reproducing any portion of the site without permission,” can one enter the site; view some of the content, videos, and maps; and hear the language. Thus access and use are conditional on making an ethical commitment to act responsibly as opposed to standard online click-through agreements that generally emphasize commercial and legal interests.

Similarly, the Blackfoot people's Blackfoot Digital Library has a terms of service (TOS) statement and conditions of use policy on their website that includes this statement on knowledge acquisition and use: "You are not considered a member of any Blackfoot tribe nor are you considered a Shaman/Medicine person because you learned something on this site. This site is not for recreating Blackfoot ceremony by non-Blackfoot people." With this very direct statement, the Blackfoot undo the common notion that information online can and should be used freely for individual purposes. Grounded in a long history of appropriation of Native peoples' religious and ceremonial practices, the Blackfoot TOS are a *cultural intervention*: a clear set of terms for what *not* to do with the site's content. The Blackfoot TOS can be seen as an invitation for all viewers and site users to engage ethically, regardless of legal terms.

In the Inland Pacific Northwest at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, many Native American collections are kept separate, and public access to these objects is restricted. The Museum has a private room for sacred materials set apart from the general collections area. Tribal community members and elders can view, touch, and interact with their cultural belongings at the Museum, but the general public cannot. This policy is a reminder that not all objects are ripe for inspection, documentation, and use.

All of these examples are reminders of tactile, material, and embodied ethical practices of curation that disrupt the continued disavowal of Indigenous histories, knowledge systems, and sovereignty. They promote a type of curation that relies on histories, relationships, and the social life of information to define strategies of collection, arrangement, and sharing. If we take the general "get it, curate it, share it" model and expand it to include *cultural, ethical, and historical checks* at each step, then we get a workflow that encourages collaboration, relies on historical specificity, and has ethical considerations embedded at every step. Finding or discovery should not be guided by a search paradigm that disregards the colonial histories of collection or upholds notions of access that privilege the public domain. It takes a bit of historical amnesia to forget that the public domain has never been a very welcoming place for Indigenous peoples, whose cultural materials found their way into both public and private collections by dubious and often violent means (Phillips 2005; Lonetree 2012).

By disregarding this historical context, the default for digitization and curation becomes mired in competing notions of open access and the public good, where accessibility is synonymous with "open to all" without regard for cultural, social, and historical conditions. But, if we add in *cultural checks* prior to curation or sharing, then we are compelled to think through the implications of curating a set of belongings (not objects). Is it appropriate to display images of deceased people? Is imposing a Native design on unrelated materials a type of intellectual violence? How might it affect contemporary Indigenous peoples to have their personal records in a searchable database? Inserting these checks slows down the process and in that process invites conversations between various sets of stakeholders. Emphasizing cultural checks broadens the notion of curation beyond the individual item or collection by locating it within a history, social relations, and ongoing political situations that move between the past and present and multiple groups of people.

We can think about this slow process as one of *digital heritage stewardship*. Shifting from collecting to stewarding undoes the colonial model and inscribes a relational model built on obligations that one has to care for, maintain, and preserve a variety of belongings. Building specifically from Indigenous systems of relation, obligations to act are meaningful commitments to one's kin—human or other-than-human—including the physical landscape. Digital heritage stewardship is based on a model of *collaborative curation*—a set of practices that redefine and interrupt the standard workflow of the digital content lifecycle, where content often seems

devoid of context or culture and processes of discovery and re-use do not always account for colonial collecting practices, current political situations, and the biased classification systems that permeate curation models.

### **Collaborative Curation: The Plateau Peoples' Web Portal**

At the core of engaging in collaborative curation is grounding all parts of the work—technological, archival, design, and production—in a give-and-take between all sets of stakeholders. Community members should be involved from the inception of the project. The “build it, and they will come” model of software design and/or collections management disregards individual- or community-level needs, desires, and goals. While no community is homogeneous, and there will always be more than one way to curate a collection, open dialogue from the beginning undoes the traditional expert role of academics, archivists, and technologists and begins with an understanding that the process of curation entails many voices from each local community and from within and beyond the academy (Barber 2013; Miffin 2014; McCracken 2015).

The Plateau Peoples' Web Portal (Portal), a project I direct at Washington State University (WSU), is an online archive of Plateau peoples' cultural materials that is collaboratively curated and reciprocally managed by representatives from six tribes—the Colville, Coeur d'Alene, Spokane, Umatilla, Yakama, and Warm Springs, with whom WSU holds a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)—and the WSU Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections team. Creating the Portal grew out of the expressed needs of the tribes, who wanted an online space where tribal members could both access and participate in narrating records from the WSU libraries. I first met with tribal representatives in 2008 to discuss their needs and vision for the Portal. Being dispersed across three states, the tribes wanted a way to access collections related to their communities without having to go to the WSU campus, they wanted to take part in the management and curation of their cultural materials, and they wanted some assurances about the long-term storage and security of those materials. To this end, we worked together to both technically and philosophically make tribal knowledge central to every aspect of the Portal. We made individual MOUs available to each tribe to define their specific goals, needs, and project parameters. This may seem like an unnecessary step; however, creating an MOU or another document that clearly states the contours of engagement, sharing, and partnership empowers each set of partners and encourages collaboration that goes beyond good intentions by defining goals, outcomes, and resources. Similarly, at the institutional level, we secured server space in perpetuity for the Portal content and ensured the longevity of the project by locating it physically within the WSU Libraries and within the overall scope of the Library's duties (not one individual). Thus, at every stage, we sought to strike a balance between the informational needs, sovereign rights, and ethical concerns of the tribes and the professional concerns and institutional standards of librarians, archivists, and other information specialists.

The Portal starts from a position that recognizes and respects the fact that tribal cultural protocols define a range of access parameters, of which “open” is only one among many. It is possible that an image may only be viewable to family members because someone in the picture is recently deceased and the community's cultural protocols do not allow nonfamily members to view the images. Or, it could be that a map depicting sacred burial grounds may only be open to elders in the tribe because the location of the grounds needs to be protected. It could also be that an audio file may only be accessible to specific ritual participants due to the sensitive nature of the materials. There are many scenarios in which individuals and

communities wish to define access based on their own histories, social systems, and cultural norms. Allowing communities to define their own protocols for access and circulation respects these differences, and good design and technological architecture should support, not suppress, such differences.

During the production of the Portal, our WSU team and tribal partners worked together to make decisions about design, technical functions, and collections needs. A prime example of using design to embed cultural and historical values is the Portal's main page. The design of the Portal recognizes the sovereignty of each tribe as well as what unites them across time and space. The tribal representatives chose an image of the Columbia River to signify the uniting body of water that flows through all tribal boundaries, and each tribe also has their own "tribal path" in the Portal with an image, welcome audio and text, and their own tribal links. Importantly, on the backend they can change any of this design at any time on their own with no permission required from the WSU team. Similarly, the Portal's metadata fields are grounded in tribal priorities. We sought to expand traditional standard metadata fields to include an emphasis on local knowledge, values, and sensibilities. For example, while Library of Congress (LOC) standard subject headings are an option within the Portal for records search, the main browse and search interfaces and selection choices are driven by tribally generated categories, subjects, and keywords. The twelve main browse categories were chosen by tribal representatives and can be expanded or updated at any time.

In addition, at the individual item level, tribal members can add tribal knowledge and cultural narratives to each record. The scholarly record is not erased, but enhanced with tribal voices. For example, one photograph titled "3 Yakama Women" from WSU's L.V. McWhorter collection was chosen by the Yakama tribal representatives for digitization and inclusion in the public view of the Portal. The metadata for the record from WSU—the scholarly record—includes an approximate date the photo was taken (1911) and a description of the photo: "A photo of 3 Yakama women in regalia (1911)." Beyond that, there is no more information about the photo, the women, the regalia, the Yakama people and culture, the historical circumstances, why the photo was taken, or if the women gave their permission.

However, because the Portal allows multiple records for one piece of content and tribal community members provide those records, we now have a more nuanced understanding of the photo. Jolena Tillequets and Vivian Adams, both Yakama women, added their own narratives to the image. Tillequets writes:

The ladies in this picture are all very unique in their style of dress. They may have helped in the creation of their dresses'. With the skinning and tanning of the buckskin, to the beadwork to their dress and accessories. The wampum necklaces were usually passed down to young woman as part of their dowry. As you see the first lady on the left has many strands of wampum while the third has one but has the two eagle feathers.

(“3 Yakama Women” 2014)

Adams adds:

Historically, hide dresses were worn daily, many undecorated because they were “work” clothes, although some form of decoration might be added. More highly decorated hide dresses were made to be used in rite-of-passage ceremonies including important family or tribal gathering events. Hide dresses were once decorated with

natural color-dyed porcupine quills and when beads were introduced circa early 1800s, they were much easier to use in curilinear designs and became plentiful as fur traders and settlers began moving westward and trades increased with them. Dresses still use shells, elk teeth, hide fringes, wampum bone beads, tiny bells or coins and whatever else may add to the aesthetics of the dress. The hide dresses these young ladies wear don't seem to have the original animal tail as part of the neck decoration. The tail was often used not only as an aesthetic enhancement but also as a show of respect and thanks to the animal for giving its life for the hide dress, food and utility tools made from its remains. The dresses do have beaded geometrical motifs which stand in place of the animal tails and these are beaded center front and back of the dress, so the form of thanks and respect is still given in this newer method of decoration.

(“3 Yakama Women” 2014)

This added knowledge expands the public record and invites viewers to understand more about the Yakama, their history, and their cultural practices. Importantly, it also undoes the taken-for-granted viewing of Native peoples out of historical and social context.

### **Collaborative Stewardship: Some Practical Steps**

For those of us working in universities, at collecting institutions, or on digital humanities or media projects that engage with content by or about Indigenous communities, it is important to be cognizant of histories of exclusion and how our technologies can reproduce imbalances. There are a few steps I have learned through these projects that are helpful in building an ethical and reciprocal framework for collaborative curation.

- First, engage. Projects should begin with engagement with all stakeholders: tribal nations representatives, community members, library staff, IT staff, and graphic designers, for example. Do not start with technologists assuming that a “digital” project has its roots in zeros and ones. Instead, projects should grow from stated needs, issues, challenges, and scenarios already in play.
- Second, talk. Start by talking face-to-face with all interested parties. And then talk some more, and talk a little bit more. Often specific needs will unfold over the course of several in-person gatherings, and it is important to build trust, especially with communities and user groups who have been historically shut out of these conversations. Be open to talking with multiple groups within tribal nations and collecting institutions. If you work at a non-Indigenous library, museum, university, or institution, go to the communities you want to engage, attend their public meetings, and do not have all your interactions in a university setting. Power rests in places.
- Third, help. Projects have an arc, and it is important to help people at every step to determine the specific needs for certain tasks. Note which partners need which kind of technology support and training, and define what type of help is best suited for each. Highlight your strengths as well as the strengths of stakeholders. Do not replay a victim model, where others need outside researchers and experts to come and save them. In a collaborative project, all stakeholders bring something to the table.
- Fourth, invest. Research-driven projects often have timelines defined by tenure clocks, grant funding cycles, and other non-community-based concerns. However, when partnering with communities who have been displaced and whose resources and

knowledge have been used and abused by researchers, it is important to take the time to build relationships by investing in resources. Digital equipment, infrastructure, and educational tools are only some types of investments. Building up both technical and human resources shows a commitment to the long term, not to a one-off project that benefits only outsiders.

- Fifth, create. For the types of archival, linguistic, and cultural projects Indigenous communities may wish to produce, creation might mean building new tools and platforms or finding ways to tweak existing ones. Instead of asking Indigenous peoples to bend to your technology, be willing to bend the technology to their needs, goals, and priorities.
- Finally, support. Provide ongoing and uninterrupted support for tribal partners including (but not limited to) technical and educational opportunities. After the platform is built or the archive is programmed, there is much more to be done. Providing ongoing support is the thread that runs through the project and will lead to a long-lasting relationship.

Taken together, these steps comprise an ETHICS (Engage, Talk, Help, Invest, Create, Support) for archival practices. Choosing to follow this path will not guarantee success, but ETHICS does set a framework for respectful digital archiving projects that create not just records, but relationships.

### Acknowledgments

This work has been funded by the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute for Museum and Library Services. None of the work on the Portal would be possible without the partnerships between Washington State University and the Spokane Tribe of Indians, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe of Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Nez Perce Tribe, and Yakama Nation. Finally, a debt of gratitude to my generous, hard-working, and talented colleagues at the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at WSU.

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