Wampum, Sequoyan, and Story: Decolonizing the Digital Archive

Ellen Cushman

I. Digital Archives: A Decolonial Option?

For some years, the Cherokee Nation has hosted a digital archive that includes stories in the Cherokee language, available to anyone who registers for the Nation’s free online language classes or requests them to be sent in DVD format. On the ᏣᎳᎩ ᏗᎧᏃᎮᏍᎦᏣᎩᏗᏓᏔᏙᏣᏔ/ tsalagi dikanohesda & dikanogida/ Cherokee Stories and Songs DVD for instance, users see an opening interface that offers selections of digital stories, kids shows, songs, and animated books. All feature the eighty-five character Cherokee syllabary. The Cherokee Songs and Stories DVD was created to support the curriculum of the K–6 Cherokee immersion school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, as one facet of larger language perseverance efforts, which take advantage of the affordances of digital archiving to reproduce often-told Cherokee stories in the Cherokee language. The DVD presents a particularly rich illustration of the promise of digital language preservation materials for one tribe and for scholars who hope to engage in historiographical inquiry using digital spaces like these.

Digital archives, such as the Cherokee Stories and Songs DVD, have captured the imagination of humanities scholars and rhetoric and composition scholars alike for good reason. Digital archives provide opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations around collections (Bulger et al.). Methodologically, they can provide scholars with a means to gather and analyze literacy narratives, as the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) does (Selfe). DALN provides models for one of the most common first-year writing assignments and also serves as a repository of data

Citizen of the Cherokee Nation, Ellen Cushman is professor of writing, rhetoric, and American cultures at Michigan State University. She is coeditor with Mary Juzwik of Research in the Teaching of English, and she is codirector with David E. Kirkland of the Center for Applied Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Arts and Humanities. Her most recent book, The Cherokee Syllabary: Writing the People’s Perseverance (Oklahoma UP, 2011), earned honorable mention for the MLA Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize and was recognized as an outstanding academic title by Choice.
for ethnohistorians (Ulman, DeWitt, and Selfe; Bryson). Feminist researchers find ample opportunity to access the journals of less frequently studied women’s organizations, political figures, and authors, arguing especially that archival work happening in languages other than English is central to understanding the everyday rhetorical work occurring in communities (Enoch; Leon). Overall, digital archives have changed both the processes (Solberg) and sites of knowledge making for composition and rhetoric scholars. James Purdy goes so far as to say that “the life of knowledge production, particularly in the academy, depends upon digital archives as the texts we study and produce—and that define the discipline—increasingly live in these spaces” (27). Though texts will continue to live in many spaces, particularly print and script, Purdy’s point remains: digital archives are beginning to define the disciplinary work we do. As knowledge making increasingly relies on digital archives, scholars need to understand the troubled and troubling roots of archives if they’re to understand the instrumental, historical, and cultural significance of the pieces therein.

I consider the problems and promise of digital archives in the first two parts of this essay through an analysis of a digital story presented in the stories section of the Cherokee Stories and Songs DVD. When users click the “Stories” link, they are taken to an interface where they can select from a menu of several Cherokee stories that then play inside the frame of the interface. I will treat in this essay one of these stories, “Milkyway Story,” one that Cherokee elders have long told of how the Milky Way was created. As I describe in Part III of this essay, today this story is remediated into digital format on the DVD with computer-generated graphics, Cherokee language voiceover, and title files written only in Sequoyan, the Cherokee writing system developed by Sequoyah and introduced to the tribal council in 1821. In Part IV, I discuss how this use of Sequoyan continues a legacy of perseverance, and in Part V, I consider how this digital story represents the social practices of storytelling as epistemological activities. My analysis of this story throughout reveals both the affordances and challenges of digital archiving as I rely upon the instructive properties of indigenous forms of archiving knowledge: stories told and written in indigenous languages and media.

Decolonial digital archives have built into them the instrumental, historical, and cultural meanings of whatever media they include. To be understood, such media need to be contextualized within the social practices that lend them these meanings. I hope to demonstrate one way to decolonize the archive through historiography that seeks to re-place media in the languages, practices, and histories of the communities in which they are created. Decolonial archives operate through an understanding of time immemorial that belies the imperial creation of tradition marked along Western timelines. They operate by relocating meaning in the context of its unfolding that opposes the imperial archive’s penchant for collecting, classifying, and isolating. They operate through the co-construction of knowledge based on interactions
between storytellers and listeners that counter the imperial archive’s insistence on expert codification of knowledge. And they operate through linguistic and cultural perseverance rather than the imperialist agenda of preservation of cultural tradition as hermetically sealed, contained, and unchanging.

II. WAMPUM BELTS AND THE IMPERIALIST ARCHIVE

As one facet of a six-year-long ethnohistorical study, I’ve been working with the Cherokee Nation Co-Partner Johnson O’Malley (JOM) program to help develop the Four Worlds curriculum for their educational programs. Over the course of two summers, the JOM program brought together teams of between 23 and 118 that included Cherokee elders, language teachers, program directors, community leaders, and tribal leaders. I served as project manager with a team of Cherokee scholars, including Kathryn England, Les Hannah, and Tom Holm, as we compiled the curriculum derived from knowledge that the larger teams deemed most appropriate for Cherokees to know. This curriculum translates the knowledge presented in a selection of our wampum belts into Cherokee and English and is organized around Cherokee history told through four eras, or “worlds,” that Cherokees have occupied. Our wampum belts, like those of the Iroquois, were made of purple and white quahog shells woven together into strips 4 to 10 inches wide and several feet long using seaweed and sinew. These Cherokee wampum belts were made as texts, an archiving system of sorts, which chronicled events, negotiations with other tribes and colonists, and Cherokee philosophies. Thought to be several hundred years old by those who have seen them, the wampum belts mediated our histories and knowledge with their mnemonic instrumentality, and they served pedagogical purposes to teach Cherokee life ways to all who heard them read. Our team loosely translated the teachings marked by these wampum belts into the Four Worlds curriculum.

For everyone involved in building the curriculum, the Cherokee language was seen as a priority, though everyone also acknowledged that a good deal of remediation in English would be necessary. The team maintained the privileged position of Sequoyan throughout the curriculum: each of the four units is arranged with Cherokee first, then English transliterations, then rough translations into English. Our goal was to remain consistent with Cherokee Nation communications policy that privileges Sequoyan, but more important, to frame the entire curriculum in Cherokee understandings represented in the belts.

Chief Chadwick Smith and several educational and cultural leaders asked for the curriculum because the elder fire keepers who read these wampum belts had apparently been pressed by several archives and museums to sell them. Several Cherokees I spoke with, whose ages ranged between late forties and seventies, recalled these belts being read at stomp grounds around the fourteen counties of the Cherokee
Nation jurisdiction. In September of each year, elders read the belts at one of the oldest stomp grounds to Cherokee fire keepers from other grounds and their families, as well as to Cherokees who attended these stomp dances. They did so not only to secure the knowledge, but also to train the youths in the formal version of spoken Cherokee, what many call Old Cherokee, that is needed to read them. Apparently, two of the wampum belts went missing, rumored to have been sold to collectors from an archive. The fire keepers secured the remaining belts and decided to no longer take them out to read at stomp grounds.

Very few pictures exist of these wampum belts, but one picture was brought to the curriculum-building sessions. Using this picture, the brother of a fire keeper told the stories that our team of scholars and Cherokee leaders subsequently used to help build a curriculum. As he told the stories in English, he offered several key concepts in Old Cherokee with translations. We collected these phrases and translations, triangulated them with the Cherokee language team, and incorporated them throughout the curriculum. And it’s here that my characterization of the affordances of digital storytelling for language and cultural continuance needs much more qualification in light of Western intellectual traditions.

The ways knowledge is imparted—through what media, by whom, and for what ends—remain central, though unresolved issues in developing this curriculum, and speak to the troubled and troubling history of archiving. Why archive in the first place? What types of mediation and information make collecting and displaying possible? What types of knowledge work do archives make possible and limit? These questions point to the problems of imperialist archives that establish Western tradition by collecting and preserving artifacts from othered traditions.

These questions also begin to get at the roots of archiving sensibilities, decolonial work at its core that seeks to redress what Malea Powell calls the “project of the imperial archive in the Americas” (“Dreaming” 117). Qualifying archive in this way, Powell suggests that archives have long been imperial projects. At the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), for example, the roots of archiving hold strong in the imperialist soil of Western thought. Their collections of Native knowledge, practices, and sacred objects fail to balance the stories of struggle with the stories of survival and resistance, what Gerald Vizenor termed survivance (Atalay 278). Though the museum references Vizenor’s understanding of survivance as foundational to its design principles, the stories of colonization and the processes by which these objects came to be collected and displayed are not only de-emphasized, but purposely left out. Sonya Atalay criticizes the founding director of the museum, W. Rick West, who chose to stress the brighter side of survivance—survival—in order to emphasize the we-are-still-here message (Atalay 279–81). Telling only the story of remaining, though, fails to decolonize the very concept and practice of archiving and museum creation by ignoring indigenous peoples’ longstanding resistance to imperialist oppression. NMAI changed the content of
museums without changing, or, for that matter, even pointing out, the structures of imperialism. To decolonize the archive requires just such an interrogation of the imperialist structures informing them.

Archives of indigenous artifacts came into existence in part to elevate the Western tradition through a process of othering “primitive” and Native traditions. Through institutions such as archives and museums, Western knowledge is *enunciated*, that is, brought into being, codified, legitimized, and reproduced as knowledge (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent” 163). Imperialist archives function as institutions of Western thought through “training of new (epistemic obedient) members and control of who enters and what knowledge-making is allowed, disavowed, devalued or celebrated” (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent” 176). One particular way archives and museums help to structure, establish, and maintain modernist thought is by training visitors to view artifacts along a singular, linear concept of time in which Western modernity can invent tradition (in the singular) by naming its stages of progress and development (for example, Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, and so on). This singular notion of tradition, created under the framing narrative of linear time, “was used to disavow the legitimacy of the ‘traditions’ (invented in the process of inventing modernity) of civilizations that were colonized” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 160). Western thinking creates its own singular tradition by pointing to itself along a timeline hatch-marked within and against a plurality of traditions. Installations at museums typically include plaques to indicate the name of the item, its date, and its origin (if known). Using dates, archives and museums train their visitors to be epistemologically obedient to Western modernity’s concept of tradition.

Tradition. Collection. Artifacts. Preservation. These tenets of colonial thought structure archives whether in material or digital forms. Western linear time, as Walter Mignolo argues, is a “fundamental concept in building the imaginary of the modern/colonial world and an instrument for both controlling knowledge and advancing a vision of society based on progress and development” (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 161). When we turn back the narrative of progress and development this way, as with the Four Worlds curriculum and wampum belts, we have begun the work of epistemic delinking, which resituates understanding from the decolonial perspectives that emerged as a counterpoint to modern/colonial thought (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option” 46). The Cherokee Four Worlds curriculum helps us imagine alternative epistemological structures for archives by re-placing the tenets of the colonial imperative within one tribe’s indigenous notions of history, place, meaning, and perseverance.

The Cherokee Nation organized this curriculum on a very different understanding of progress, one that resists comparison to Western tradition. The Four Worlds curriculum locates Cherokee people in the places we have lived since time immemorial, a concept that refuses to locate these worlds along any precise dates.
Rather, each of the four worlds is bounded by events that impact Cherokees and the stories that reveal lessons learned about food, formation of clans, changes in our relationships to animals, and gifts of medicines received during these periods. The first world, for example, is titled “The Land of The Great Turtles” and opens with a story about the giant sea turtles that our peoples cared for before fire was given to humans, when the turtles were roughly 20 feet across. This curriculum begins its work with a very different understanding of eras as relayed in our wampum belts. These Cherokee understandings, which have always stood apart from Western notions of dates, place, religion, and means of expression, have helped Cherokees survive in the face of great challenges.

If the first move in decolonizing the archive is to challenge Western understandings of time as a necessary underpinning for tradition, the second move takes up the problem of collecting artifacts. The actions involved in the collection of artifacts damage them in three ways: (1) the item is taken from its context of use; (2) it is no longer understood in relation to the stories that place the item in its context and in relation to the people who use it; and (3) the people who would ostensibly have uses for the item are necessarily presumed to be no longer living. Whoever it was that sought to collect the Cherokee wampum belts in the first place worked from these presumptions. That person was rightly understood as posing a threat to the belts, the Cherokee people, and Cherokee knowledge. In the press to collect a wampum belt, the item needed to be made into a dead object, an “artifact,” a remnant of supposedly lost traditions, valued because these traditions were ostensibly lost in the press to define the Western tradition through the colonial imperative.

The third move in decolonizing the archive emerges directly from the second when trying to understand how these “artifacts” work to mediate knowledge for the people who use them. What does this object mean to the people who use it? Even though it seems a collector has succeeded in obtaining a Cherokee wampum belt, that person is not likely to know how to read it, how it works, or what it means. Though they’re no longer taught publicly, these belts still allow Cherokees to mediate stories, to tell again the recent history of the tribe, and to teach each other. The Cherokee word for wampum belts, ᏏᎧᏅᏄ / dekanvnu, means roughly to “look this way,” or “a way to look toward.” Because they are lived, spoken, read, enacted, and taught, and because they provide a history or way to look toward, the Cherokee wampum belts represent our continued survival as a tribe. Although the belts themselves have been withdrawn from public reading in an effort to protect them from unscrupulous collectors, the messages and teachings they provide can live on in the Four Worlds curriculum.

Unfortunately, some amount of the meaning of these belts is lost in the curriculum because (1) it is written largely in English and (2) the listener and elder are distant from each other in the telling. Suppose that a collector did indeed obtain one of the Cherokee wampum belts. What could she or he have done with the belt that
could possibly have enacted the knowledge these belts mediate? These belts are read using Old Cherokee, which only a very few Cherokees know (and all of them are fire keepers or in training to be). They are read to listeners whose duty it is to pick up, hold on to, teach, tell, and let go of the knowledge imparted therein (more on this soon). And they are read in ceremonial contexts that relate to balancing our lives, families, clans, and tribe with earth and the universe. Only the hubris of imperialist thinking could have emboldened a collector to believe that these belts could be or should be preserved as artifacts of “lost” traditions. Without also being well versed in their meanings and the language used to unpack that meaning, the belts are nothing more than a woven collection of shell beads and sinew.

This brings me to the fourth and final move that would be necessary to decolonize the digital archive: indigenous languages. The language used to tell the stories in archives matters a great deal because English has been key to establishing Western thinking and histories. In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Mignolo has traced the ways that English language and literacy have been foundational to enunciations of imperialist knowledge. He elaborates this thinking in later works: “languages based on Greek and Latin provided the ‘tool’ to create a given conception of knowledge that was then extended to the increasing, through time, European colonies from the Americas to Asia and Africa” (“Epistemic Disobedience, Independent” 164). Chief among these modern languages, English remains the lingua franca of imperialism, knowledge work, and global capitalism. Opening each unit of the Four Worlds curriculum with Cherokee represents one small step in an ongoing process of epistemic delinking from the primacy of the English language and Roman alphabet because it chiefly values the Cherokee syllabary.

Stepping back, we see that these four moves demonstrate a decolonial option to archives that have been based on four tenets of Western imperialist thought. *Tradition*, based as it is on Western notions of time, necessitated the creation of *tribal traditions* against which it could define itself. As imperialist archives organized themselves, they *collected* evidence of these traditions by abstracting* sacred, ceremonial, and everyday objects from the contexts of their uses. As this was done, these objects became *artifacts*, artifacts that were presumed to be useless, no longer valuable or in use by the people who practiced ceremonies or lived with these objects. Artifacts can then be displayed, hermetically sealed off from their everyday or ceremonial use, preserved. And *preservation*, the raison d’être of archives, presumes these peoples no longer persevere by creating and transmitting knowledge with and through these objects using indigenous languages to speak their meaningfulness into existence. Mindful now of these four tenets that have structured much archiving work, we are better poised to begin to pursue a decolonial archive. In the following sections, I analyze the language, writing, and story-ness of “Dog He Ran” to suggest the promise of digital archives that work from decolonial understandings of time, place, meaning, and perseverance.
Entering the Cherokee Songs and Stories DVD, a click on the “Stories” link opens a new window featuring a small selection of stories, illustrated through computer or hand-drawn images and told in Cherokee. As the stories proceed, the only writing that appears on the screen is in Sequoyan. Selecting a story titled in English “Milkyway Story” opens a video, which begins by playing the title in Cherokee: \( \text{ᎠᏂᏣᎳᎩ ᏧᏃᎯ ᏠᏅᏗᏍᎨ } \text{ᏎᎩᏅᎷ} \text{ᏎᎨᏅᏝᏣᏖᎵ} \text{ᏎᎦᏃᏗᎾ} \text{ᏎᎨᎨᎢ} \text{ᏎᎩᏅᎷ} \text{ᏔᎳᏦᏐᏙᎸ} \text{ᏔᎨᎩᎦᏗ}. \) The narrator tells the story of a dog that steals corn flour from Cherokee women in the night, so the women hatch a plan to catch the dog in the act of stealing their corn flour. They lay in wait until they see the dog again stealing their corn flour, and they chase him. They run so fast that the dog leaps right up into the night sky. As he runs, the corn flour he had stolen falls from his mouth and marks his path across the sky to form the Milky Way.

As the story progresses, viewers see only Sequoyan written and hear only Cherokee spoken. Because many don’t know the language, they have to rely on the visual representation and other aural clues to help them piece together the action of the story with the words. At one point, a loud, pounding drum helps viewers infer the heart-pounding pace of the dog and the women who chase him. Non-Cherokee audiences can gather the gist of this story from these visual and aural clues of the video. Cherokee language learners gather much more, as this direct translation of a selection of lines begins to indicate (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Narration of “Milkyway Story.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.ᎢᎳᎦ, ᏣᏦᎨᏗ, ᏣᏦᏔᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏣᏔᏦᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gohidiyv tisgev, anigayvl aninohegsgei nihina kanoheda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long ago, the elders they were reportedly telling this story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DhGWY synthesize D0·&gt;J0·TE 4M DhGWY synthesize 4Mn0·TE . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anitsalagi kanohi andigse selu anisdosgv, seluhisa anotlvsgei . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherokee people they were pounding corn. Corn flour they were making . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ᎤᏝᏦᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏧᏃᎨᎨᎢ ᎢᏔᏦᏔᎤᏔ, ᏧᏃᎨᎨᎢ ᏛᏔᏦᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saquu iga nvnagatahohai unitishuhahv seluhisa. Gitli dutasinidolv dunigowadvhe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One day they looked (they had lost the) corn flour. Dog places he walked around (his tracks) they checked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ᏣᏔᏦᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏣᏔᏦᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏧᏃᎨᎨᎢ ᏛᏔᏦᏔᎤᏔ . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soi nsvv nanulistana nvnadisgatlanei anitsalagi . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next night incidentally (as a result) the Cherokee people got together . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ᎤᏝᏔᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏧᏔᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏧᏔᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ, ᏧᏔᏔᏗᏍᏔᏅ. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog he started eating the corn flour. They came running. They started chasing the dog.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this digital story, it is important to note that Cherokee writing and language exist without the transliterations, direct translation, and rough translations in parentheses provided here. This digital story is composed in and on Cherokee terms, as it tries to leverage digital media’s affordances to immerse learners in the language, a move that decolonizes this archive through re-placement of the story in meaningful acts of perseverance across time.

Inscribing not just the sounds of the Cherokee language, the digital story offers simultaneous illustrations to connect the spoken words to the context of the unfolding action. Users glimpse the workings of the language’s close match to the contexts of the unfolding action. For instance, in this next set of phrases, notice how each word builds a picture of the unfolding action described in the story and portrayed in the movie:

\[
	ext{ᎠᏂᏣᎳᎩ ᎧᏃᎭ ᎠᏅᏗᏍᎨ ᏎᎷ ᎠᏂᏍᏙᏍᎬ, ᏎᎷᏌ ᎠᏃᏢᏍᎨᎢ . . . }
\]
\[
	ext{Anitsalagi kanohi anvdisge selu anisdosgv, seluhisa anotlvsgei . . .}
\]
\[
	ext{Cherokee people they were pounding corn. Corn flour they were making . . .}
\]

The image shows the women, with a large mortar and pestle, standing near cornstalks, with several ears of corn at the front of the image (see Fig. 1). Each word is linked to action unfolding as the movie plays.
The written Cherokee also shows the action unfolding in part because that is how this polysynthetic language works: it is built on verb phrases that “picturize what’s happening,” as my Cherokee language instructor says (see Cushman, “The Cherokee Syllabary,” “Learning,” and The Cherokee Syllabary for more on how the language works). Anishinaabemowin language researcher Margaret Noori describes the picturizing work that Ojibwe verb phrases also do: “We begin with a root verb at the center of a sentence, or an event at the center of a story. The perspective is always one of circular observation. A speaker should be attempting to describe what is above, in front, behind and below” (14). Polysynthetic languages, such as Cherokee and many other indigenous languages, build pictures around the roots of verbs using prefixes and affixes to describe the action unfolding (Peter, Hirata-Edds, and Montgomery-Anderson). Digital stories like this reinforce and illustrate precisely the descriptive contextualization of action that verb phrases do in polysynthetic languages for learners. Because digital stories and archives bring the spoken, visual, and written together at once, they are able to represent to some degree the deeply contextualized nature of the meaningful ways in which verb phrases in polysynthetic languages work (Peter, Hirata-Edds, and Montgomery-Anderson; Chavez).

Digital stories, audio recordings, online language classes, and digital dictionary projects that include audio recordings and images together have played and will continue to play an increasingly important role in language preservation efforts for Cherokees and other tribes (Galla). They provide something like an immersive experience in the language that has been central to Native people’s language preservation efforts for the past two decades (Galla; Altiman). Immersion is especially needed for heritage language learners, those Cherokees whose parents’ or grandparents’ generations lost their abilities to speak, read, and write in Cherokee.

Immersion in the language helps heritage language learners recover what their parents’ generations were in many cases forced to give up. These efforts to persevere in the language in digital and print media come at a watershed moment for many tribes (Treuer). For the Cherokee Nation, the situation is less bleak perhaps than for other tribes, but is alarmingly bad for Cherokees nevertheless (Long). In 2000, the Cherokee Nation conducted a survey that “showed nearly 64 percent of Cherokee citizens do not speak or understand the language. About 5 percent understand the language but cannot speak it, 17 percent understand and have some speaking ability, 3 percent are conversational, 10 percent are highly fluent, and only 1 percent have mastery of the language” (Chavez). Yet 95 percent of the respondents surveyed agreed that ensuring the vitality of the language was important to Cherokee identity and heritage (Simmons). This suggests that the Cherokee language is valued as part of identity and heritage; that language loss is an important issue to address in order to maintain Cherokee peoplehood; and that those Cherokees who still speak, read, and write the language are valued assets. Given the language’s perceived importance
and its rapid decline in use, the Cherokee Nation developed a Cherokee immersion school, privileged the Cherokee language in public communications, and developed several K–12 programs through the JOM programs.

One of the greatest strengths of the Cherokee Nation’s digital storytelling and other digital language archives rests in the ways they offer an avenue for the continued use of the Cherokee language. These efforts allow learners to immerse themselves to some extent, to re-place the Cherokee language in the context and sound of its use. Cherokee words are visually, aurally, and symbolically linked to actions unfolding in a context all at once, similar to the way that this and other indigenous, polysynthetic languages actually work. Such re-placing decolonizes archives because it works against the imperialist archival tenet of extracting and decontextualizing objects.

Obviously, this digital story can achieve only a partial and limited immersive effect, not equal to learning the language by living with Cherokee speakers and hearing it spoken every day or using the immersion pedagogies of language nests (Meakins; Reyhner, Gilbert, and Lockard; Dicker, Dunbar, and Johns; Peter, Hirata-Edds, and Montgomery-Anderson; Hinton). At best, such digital archives can only approximate these experiences by offering a simulation of the context of activity in the voiceover of a Native language speaker who would likely be telling this story, and by carefully timing the interaction of these media to ensure the video and words occur simultaneously. Without further research, though, it is not evident how often Cherokee language speakers might actually read a story like this to their children in Sequoyan, or how children or adult learners might gather meaning from this or other digital stories. Still, digital stories like these have one other selling point: they allow for the seamless integration of writing in Sequoyan into the mix, drawing on the decolonial value of the writing system.

IV. Writing Systems in Digital Compositions

Language immersion materials and digital stories such as these privilege Sequoyan to the exclusion of the Roman alphabet and English for many reasons. Sequoyan stands alone in these digital stories, writing the story in and on Cherokee terms, mirroring how Sequoyan works instrumentally, historically, and culturally. Throughout the “Milkyway” digital story, subtitles written in Sequoyan play as the action in the movie unfolds. The subtitles end when the speaking stops and the action changes. Given its prominence in the story and its role as the sole writing system appearing in the story, viewers become aware of the importance of Sequoyan as a key form of mediation used in Cherokee knowledge. The syllabary added into subtitles may well frustrate English-speaking viewers’ expectations that subtitles will translate the language heard into their first language.

Expecting the subtitles to be written in English, though, only overlooks the
meaning making potentials of other media, including digital media, and devalues the knowledge these might encode. Any act of reading and writing in Sequoyan is an act of what Mignolo might call *epistemic delinking*, an insistence of Cherokee language and understanding into the moment, a re-placing of Cherokee epistemologies into the geopolitical scene, and an act of epistemic decolonization (Mignolo, “Delinking”). To approach digital stories told in Cherokee and written in Sequoyan using literacy as the baseline of judgment obscures the epistemic work of these digital pieces.

Since the invention of the Cherokee writing system, knowledge would and could be made in, if not always on, Cherokee terms. Sequoyah’s first act of epistemic delinking happened when he created a uniquely Cherokee writing system. From the system’s inception, Sequoyah departed from the colonial work of literacy—that is, reading and writing with the letter—designed to displace Native languages and writings (Mignolo, “On the”): he developed a unique system of writing that codifies Cherokee language and logics (Cushman, “We’re,” “The Cherokee Syllabary from Script”). As Mignolo writes, “One strategy of de-linking is to de-naturalize concepts and conceptual fields that totalize A [sic] reality” (“Delinking” 459). Because the Cherokee syllabary was created in ways that follow the instrumental logics of Cherokee designs and language, its invention denaturalizes the concept of literacy, thus rupturing the conceptual fields of civilization, humanity, and knowledge associated with what it means to be literate, even as the syllabary appeared to be complicit with this force. This denaturalization happened first with the invention of the syllabary, which used manuscript characters that bore no resemblance to letters (Cushman, “The Cherokee Syllabary from Script”); and second, when the tribal council rejected outright an alphabetic-based orthography developed by John Pickering for use in printing religious materials (Walker and Sarbaugh; Cushman, *The Cherokee Syllabary*). Ironically, because of the invention of this writing system, Cherokees came to be described by many as one of the five “civilized” tribes, in part because they were understood to have embraced “letters.”

Although this privileging of Sequoyan and Cherokee to the exclusion of alphabetic writing and English might make some *College English* readers uncomfortable, employing the spoken and written language has an important connection to self-governance and identity among many Cherokees, particularly those who still speak the language. In many respects the educational philosophy driving the creation and use of Sequoyan in these digital educational materials for Cherokee people continues to enact sovereignty because it privileges Sequoyan and the Cherokee language (Lyons; Belt and Bender). The decolonial rhetoric implicit in the instrumental workings of this writing system carries forward, as digital stories continue to privilege Sequoyan and build on the instrumental, cultural, and historical legacies of the writing system. Digital storytelling also has the important function of introducing Cherokee language learners to a decolonial understanding of how knowledge is made through story.
We know from scholars in rhetoric and composition (Villanueva; Okawa; Powell, “Rhetorics”; Brandt et al.) the importance of storying to our lives, though the stories often conveyed in rhetoric and composition work differently for their authors and audiences. Digital stories of the type I am examining here lend another layer of import to these epistemological claims to the value of stories. Digital stories in the Cherokee language allow for an introduction to the appropriate roles for speakers and Cherokee language learners across generations.

The digital story “Dog He Ran,” described earlier, opens with a refrain common to Cherokee stories. Ᏹ᎝ᏗᎳᏨᎴ, ᏝᏨᏒᏑᏔᎳᎲ / Gohidiyv tsigesv, anigayvli aninohesgei nihiba kanogeda / Long ago, the elders, they were reportedly telling this story. When directly translated, this phrase relays again the authority, importance, and role of the listener: long ago, the elders, they were reportedly telling this story. But what does such a phrase mean? How does it do knowledge work for those who use it?

The first unit of the Four Worlds curriculum discussed earlier opens with a consideration of the importance of the Cherokee language and the stories told in this language offered to us by Benny Smith, a former assistant dean at Haskell Indian Nations University and a family member of fire keepers. He finds, “Cherokee storytelling, of course, has always happened in the Cherokee language. The words and phrases in Cherokee carry so much more meaning and subtlety than English alone can possibly capture” (Nation, “Four Worlds” 12). Because of the value of storytelling and the profundity of Cherokee language, seven Cherokee language instructors were asked to translate the word story for the opening of this section. A long and playful interaction unfolded, in which each word suggested would lead to another one. All of the language keepers found each one of these words equally useful and important, so they were included in the curriculum.

These words for story were included along with several other Cherokee words for story, and all were listed under the word ᎠᏂᎦᏴᎵ (elders) so that no mistake could be made about whom the pronoun “they” refers to in the remaining verb phrases. The word elders points listeners who understand Cherokee to the importance of who speaks—elders—and who listens. The word for elders comes first and foremost in this curriculum for several reasons. The language-speakers team wanted to make sure that when the verb phrases that followed were translated with the pronouns, everyone would link this to the noun, “elders.” These words for story are verb phrases, words as sentences, that indicate ongoing practices and intentionally point to the noun “elders” to ensure that readers understood the pronoun reference: O·h /uni / they. Elder is not a word taken lightly or applied to all who are older, but instead it means that these speakers are and were our keepers of knowledge.
Stories remain the first enunciation of knowledge for Cherokees because they are living, breathing, embodied, pedagogical, and intergenerational understandings. By opening with the notion of story as epistemological center of knowledge making, the Four Worlds curriculum and this digital archive of stories recontextualize through practices of telling, and give meaningfulness to these artifacts.

Every word for story listed here and in the curriculum represents the activity of knowledge making, which places Cherokee elders at the epistemic center of what counts as understanding. The re-placement of the knower thus relocates the locus of knowledge by asking “who and when, why and where knowledge is generated [. . .]? Asking these questions means to shift the attention from the enunciated to the enunciation” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 119). Elders themselves are situated in time, place, and context in these words for story. What they knew, told, and held on to in their minds, and what they had been told—all of these translations for the word *story*—position elders in the ongoing, shared history of telling, listening, and embodying. This digital story, in other words, makes Cherokee understandings accessible through “enunciations” of knowledge that feature elders as the actors. Thus, the understanding of story decolonizes the digital archive and Four Worlds curriculum by re-placing and relocating the understanding in the telling and sharing within the context of creating meaningful acts of perseverance through time immemorial and countless generations.

The speaker in the “Milkyway” digital story could have chosen any of the words just mentioned to describe the action involved in handing down this knowledge, but used one form of the verb *telling*, listed here: DhZPOOGT / aninohesgei / they were reportedly telling. The affix at the end of this word, “sgei,” shows that “it is understood that the speaker did not directly experience or witness the action or state expressed by the verb” (Feeling 290). This “reportedly” caveat seems less to question the authority of the elders, and more to mark the humility of the speaker. He’s not placing himself in league with the elders, as though he were privy to their conversations or they had told him this directly. Rather, he is telling what he has heard but not experienced firsthand. Though more evidence is surely warranted to substantiate this point, it does stand to reason that such a phrase might also accrue ethos to the speaker in some measure. Such a phrase could sanction this knowledge by linking it to the status of elders who speak knowledge across generations and place.
The listeners’ role as learners, as those who pick up what is let go by the elders, provides further re-placement for the stories that are being imparted in the curriculum and digital story specifically, and in Cherokee ways generally. Listeners’ roles in storytelling cannot be underestimated because listeners are asked to pick up, hold on to, teach others, and pass along what they are told. They carry forward the knowledge of Cherokees through further enunciations. Opening this digital story in this way, the speaker traces a genealogy of thought by offering the opening statement that “authorizes” him to speak this story. His speaking Cherokee in this way, using the form of the verb phrase that he does, locates himself in relation to elders and to the listeners, and is rooted in long-standing indigenous epistemological processes and practices of storytelling. Viewers of this digital story, together with the storyteller, create and hold on to the legacy of knowledge as placed and located beings who, through a series of storytelling practices, honor their experience with and in the lived experiences of Cherokees. Rather than the archive being experienced through codification of an expert’s understanding of the artifact decontextualized from its actual use, the work of storytelling in this digital archive asks participants to actively take up the knowledge, to continue the telling of it, and to position themselves in relationship to the era, the place, and the elder telling the story.

The whole importance of story for Cherokees, demonstrated in this digital story and the Four Worlds curriculum, centers on a presumption that knowledge is handed down across the eras and placed. The Cherokee language instructors involved in building the curriculum insisted on the use of elders before the list of verbs to clarify up front who presents stories and to whom. By opening with an understanding of history told in and on Cherokee terms, the curriculum represents an enunciation of decolonial knowledge that presumes a “We are where we do” epistemological stance as opposed to an “I think therefore I am” stance. The “We are where we do” epistemological stance assumes that truths are dependent on “who presents them, to whom they are addressed, and why they have been advanced in the first place” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* 99). These truths enacted together through storytelling in the Cherokee language deny the truths of the imperial archive by dint of their language, functioning, and meaningfulness to the people who engage them across the eras of Cherokee history represented in the stories.

In light of the challenges that compelled the curriculum into being in the first place—the wampum belts are no longer read publicly—the knowledge is understood to be vital to Cherokees’ continued existence beyond the Four Worlds that we now occupy. This curriculum came into being because of the exigency created when a collector wanted to preserve the cultural artifact of the wampum belt as a valued indicator of Native traditions. Decolonizing the archive in this curriculum happened only because of the continued insistence of the imperial archive into the history, lives, practices, meaning, and place of Cherokee people.
I have said all of that to say this: interactions between tellers and listeners as these are rooted in place and are central to the enunciation of knowledge and point to one place to begin decolonizing archives. The more decontextualized, categorized, itemized, arranged, installed, and chronologically organized, the more damage archives do to the understandings, practices, and objects they hope to preserve. Rather, continuing coexistence with peoples, in and through interactions that are rooted in place, seems a promising way to allow for an enunciation of knowledge that decolonizes the archive. Promising developments in the creation of archives with community stakeholders have already taken root in the work of Jim Ridolfo, William Hart-Davidson, and Michael McLeod. They argue that a necessary component of creating digital archives rests in the processes used to engage in a “[r]e-centering [of] cultural stakeholders as integral to the design process of digital archives.” When created with stakeholders, the strengthening of linguistic and cultural heritages seems more likely to happen.

VI. Stories, Enunciations, and Interaction with Archives

I have been making the case that Cherokees have used stories, wampum, a unique writing system, and digital remediation of stories to inscribe an understanding of the world. These specific instances of mediation have made possible an archiving of knowledge along a progression of events that exists in and on its own terms. The Cherokee Nation understood the importance of codifying this notion of historical events in the Four Worlds curriculum. The Cherokee history outlined in the Four Worlds organizes the units beginning since “time immemorial,” a phrase we often heard repeated by the elders who were teaching us these stories. In doing so, the curriculum becomes a decolonial archive of events insofar as it strives for the continuance of tribal understandings.

Digital archives also offer hope to scholars who wish to study aspects of American written traditions to continue providing a fuller account of regional, decolonial histories of writing in the Americas (Baca; Baca and Villanueva; Candelaria Greene). Unfortunately, digital stories and archives like these cannot escape the thorny questions of what can be mediated, especially digitally mediated, and by whom. They are limited by the type and scope of content that can be made accessible. Some stories must be told differently, in their original languages, and decisions about how these are to be mediated by writing or digital media remain controversial.

Although digital archives may have the “three gifts” that Purdy claims, “integration, customization, and accessibility” (43), they also demand a thorough critique that exposes the ways in which imperialist archives are always already framed within a colonialist mindset. Digital archives can work from decolonial tenets that privilege different languages, that build into them recontextualization and story to
make meaningful the materials they include, and that help the cultures and peoples represented in them persevere in and on their own terms.

My goal in this essay has been to take initial steps toward decolonizing the digital archive by considering how story and knowledge making around storytelling work from a Cherokee perspective. Perhaps the most important aspect of this work involves a continued resistance to the “implicit and expected monolingualism of our field’s research methods,” as Jessica Enoch, following Paul Kei Matsuda, argues (51). Painstakingly translating the Cherokee in this digital story reveals the epistemological roots of story, the ways in which the language works, and the heuristic value of Sequoyan. It necessarily expands “our understandings of the history of language and rhetorical instruction” (Enoch 51) needed to do historiographical research ethically and carefully with community archives. The Cherokee Nation included the language in this digital story and the DVD to help language learners not only understand the workings of this polysynthetic language, but also to help all learners and scholars understand and enact the social roles of holding on to and letting go of stories through retelling, explaining, and making knowledge with and through these stories.

The process of building, maintaining, and interacting with digital archives amplifies the vexed nature of the underlying imperialist assumptions of tradition and knowledge, and the material and digital mediations of archive and story. Scholars can begin to decolonize the archive by considering ways in which the archive itself, as well as the materials inside, work within communities (Enoch). Consider the tricky position our team of four Cherokee scholars found ourselves in as we worked to translate this knowledge into print, trying as we were to help the tribe understand just a fraction of the knowledge represented by these wampum belts. Even with the aid of Sequoyan, which has a remarkable instrumentality that again connects language to place through the Cherokee word, the curriculum is largely in English and had to be. The bulk of the Cherokees who will benefit from its teachings are monolingual English speakers, a point that made the privileging of Sequoyan as a framing device that much more urgent. The profundity of meaning that was lost in not being able to use Sequoyan more consistently throughout the curriculum I found regrettable, especially because our reliance on English served as a reminder of the imperial legacy that the curriculum attempted to redress in the first place.

It is not at all clear how well any archival holding of a story or digital story can recreate the situation of storytelling: the listening, holding on to, picking up, and letting go, based on the types of relationships between people who together make “artifacts” meaningful. Though the hope with the Cherokee Four Worlds curriculum is that these curricular materials will someday be available online, that may not come to pass, in large part because the Cherokee Nation did not want these to be publicly available, but available only to Cherokees, and only in ways that allowed
for the types of interaction indicated in the Cherokee words for story. Though open access to digital archives is thought to be a good thing by scholars invested in the digital humanities, for some tribes creating digital materials and giving open access to them is controversial and, in some cases, even prohibited. For me, it is important to respect the views of tribes and Nations. Anything less is to impose, yet again, a Western epistemological understanding onto their practices, even if this perspective purports itself to be liberal and egalitarian.

Digital archives such as the Cherokee Songs and Stories DVD can make accessible the stories and practices of storytelling in ways that honor indigenous enunciations of knowledge and help learners persevere in their culture and language. Digital archives can also build on the instrumental, historical, and cultural legacies of indigenous writing systems and media. Although digitizing language materials shows tremendous promise, digital archives can strive to escape the imperialist legacies on which they are built through being created and maintained by the very people they hope to represent. If this is done, the archive might become a place-based learning center where knowledge unfolds through stories told in and on the people’s terms.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Jessica Enoch and David Gold for their generous attention to this manuscript.
2. When the syllabary moved from script to print, Samuel Worcester reduced the number of characters from its original eighty-six to its current eighty-five.
3. Anthropologist James Mooney recorded this story among dozens of others he frequently heard during his years working with the Cherokees in the Southeast.
4. The tribe adopted the eighty-six original characters of the Cherokee writing system in 1821 after the characters were introduced by Sequoyah at a tribal council meeting (Cushman, “We’re”). Because the Cherokee writing system is made up of characters, the readers and writers of Cherokee are described as readers and writers of Sequoyan. Just as the English language is distinct from the alphabetic writing system used to write it, the spoken Cherokee language is distinct from Sequoyan, the Cherokee orthography used to write it. Sequoyan refers only to the written form of the Cherokee language. In my publications, I follow the Cherokee Nation’s recommendations for publishing materials in the Cherokee language, which privileges Sequoyan first, followed by English transliteration into the alphabet, followed by translation (for example, ᏌᏅ / saloli / squirrel) (Nation, Act). In this essay, I also refer to Old Cherokee, a formal and rare form of the Cherokee language that is spoken and written by a small number of elders. I’ve seen only one notebook written in Old Cherokee in the possession of an elder.
5. See Cushman, The Cherokee Syllabary and “The Cherokee Syllabary: A Writing System” for descriptions of these ethnohistorical methods and “Knowledge Work” and Gadugi for explanations of the reciprocal, activist aspects of this research.
6. I’ve never seen the belts, and, in addition to the elder who shaped the Four Worlds curriculum, I have met only three people who had seen them and heard them read several times. Two were relatives of a fire keeper who was charged with keeping a small number of the belts at one time. All three were noted Cherokee language specialists able to understand Old Cherokee, the morpheme-rich dialect that is used to “read” the belts. The Cherokees I’ve worked with understood, as Angela Haas writes, that the “wampum belts signify a surviving intellectual tradition that communicates living stories of a culture” (92). Unfortunately, since the Cherokee belts have been taken from public view, no one I have spoken
with could confirm or deny any of the specific decoding and encoding processes of reading the belts that Haas suggests.

7. This rough spelling of the word was transcribed during the building of the Four Worlds curriculum. This word has its root in the Cherokee verb for looking or viewing, such as ᏩᏓᏨᏲᎢ / hadagehvi / looking at yourself. The word’s translation was also found in an interview with Smith by Margaret Raymond in 2006.

8. Instead of “abstracting,” I could have used any number of verbs that more accurately represent the violence of this process. I chose the word abstracting instead to help us create an objective distance from this painful past so that we, together, can learn from and begin to focus on what will be possible so long as we learn, together, from our shared histories.

9. The same survey found that no one under age forty spoke the language on a daily basis (Morton).

10. I’ve begun to explore the ways in which language relates to culture and thought, and I will continue to take up this important topic in my research exploring Cherokee religious texts (Cushman, “Learning from the Cherokee Syllabary”).

11. See also Mignolo’s “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent” (4–8) for a longer consideration of the differences between enunciated and enunciation.

Works Cited


