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DIGITAL FORUM

Digitizing Indigenous History: Trends and Challenges

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[I]f 'archive' is the name we give to the power to make and command what took place here or there. ... [then] the postcolonial archive cannot be merely a collection of new artifacts reflecting a different, subjugated history. Instead, the postcolonial archive must directly address the problem of the endurance of the otherwise within – or distinct from – this form of power ... the material conditions that allow something to be archived and archivable; the compulsions and desires that conjure the appearance and disappearance of objects, knowledges and socialities within an archive; the cultures of circulation, manipulation and management that allow an object to enter the archive and thus contribute to the endurance of specific social formations.[1]

This is an exciting time for digitizing indigenous history. Leading digital humanists are engaging tribal communities in the creation of powerful online archives. The groundbreaking *Mukurtu* content management system (CMS), for example, is built on the very premise of indigenous curation or co-curation; it lets indigenous people control exactly what materials will be made visible on the Web, and under what conditions.[2] Meanwhile, tribal communities are rapidly creating their own digital spaces. These take a range of forms from impromptu practices like sharing and annotating historic photographs on *Facebook* to sophisticated apps for language revitalization.

If #dhpoco – the movement inspired by Adeline Koh and Roopika Risam – calls upon scholars to rethink both the digital and the postcolonial, then the indigenous nineteenth century calls upon us to rethink both.[3] The major collections of Native American, First Nations, Aboriginal and other indigenous materials amassed during this period are the products of a global, imperial enterprise to steal cultural materials wholesale from indigenous communities, in service to the myth that those cultures were dying. Colonial theft and vanishing race stories may not have been invented during the nineteenth century, but this was the period of unprecedented and coordinated archive building in the service of settler colonial supremacy. The Royal Society of Canada, the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), and other professional entities conducted a mission of so-called 'salvage anthropology', fanning out in search

1. Elizabeth Povinelli, 'The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall: Archiving the Otherwise in Postcolonial Digital Archives', *Differences*, 22.1 (2011), 146–171 (p. 152).
2. See <http://www.mukurtuarchive.org/> [accessed 6 March 2014].
3. The #dhpoco mission statement is available at <http://dhpoco.org/founding-principles/> [accessed 20 March 2014].

of what they liked to call (erroneously) 'the last of the tribe'. The BAE, for its part, transcribed and published countless traditional oral narratives that tribal people feel should not be shared outside of their home communities or ceremonial contexts; it also published a few that were simply bogus, 'translated' for them by Native people who had the last laugh.[4]

So the postcolonial digital archive will have to go far beyond scanning and uploading such materials, and further still than laying bare the ideologies structuring these collections. In what follows, I survey some trends in the digitization of indigenous materials and sketch out some structural challenges. My argument is that the most visible and best-funded digital archives have tended to privilege colonial collections over those stewarded, often for centuries, by tribal communities themselves. In other words, large state-sponsored granting institutions have tended to support preservation and access primarily for *non*-Native institutions: museums, universities and antiquarian societies, which hold collections from donors who may have come by their Native materials unethically, or fabricated them in the first place. 'Indigenous digital archives', as they are broadly understood at the moment, thus continue to marginalize non-colonial collections and non-colonial practices – newsletters saved in tribal offices, photographs cherished in family collections, artworks still in current use, and living oral traditions. These tell a very different story.

Trends

How to decolonize ethnographic archives in digital space? In *Performing Archive: Curtis + 'the vanishing race'*, the Claremont Center for the Digital Humanities has decided to tackle one of the best-known and readily available collections, the oeuvre of photographer Edward Curtis (1868–1952).[5] Curtis visited some 80 tribal nations, creating more than 2000 photogravure plates and publishing these in the magisterial 20-volume collection, *The North American Indian*. So determined was he to 'document' the vanishing race that he brought along his own props, like feathered headdresses, and edited his images to remove 'modern' signifiers like clocks and cowboy hats.[6] It has always been easy to find Curtis's sepia-toned pictures; indeed it has been hard to avoid them. They crowd out almost every other image of Indians,

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4. On the BAE, see Leslie Marmon Silko, 'An Old-time Indian Attack in Two Parts', in *The Remembered Earth* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), pp. 211–16. For an account of how Franz Boas mistranslated a dirty joke, see Judith Berman, 'Oolachan Woman's Robe: Fish, Blankets, Masks and Meaning in Franz Boas's Kwakw'ala Texts', in *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, ed. by Brian Swann (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), pp. 125–62.

5. Amy Borsuk, Beatrice Schuster, David J. Kim, Heather Blackmore, Jacqueline Wernimont, and Ulia Gosart, *Performing Archive: Curtis + 'The Vanishing Race'* (2013–) <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/performingarchive/index> [accessed 12 February 2014].

6. One of the best exposés is Curtis Lyman's *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

replicated as they are across postcards, T-shirts, and now websites, including the Library of Congress's *American Memory* (1994–), Northwestern University's Digitized Collections, and numerous fine art sites.

In order to build *Performing Archive*, scholars and their undergraduate students used the publishing platform *Scalar* to aggregate materials from these various websites into a gorgeous online book. They structure this book along designated interpretive paths: e.g. 'Curtis Image and Life'; 'Contextualizing Curtis, The North American Indian and Race'. A video essay asks users to think about their own consumption of racial tropes; a network visualization of Curtis's titles and subject descriptions calls his authority to name into question. Thus, *Performing Archive* is not merely a compendium of Edward Curtis's work; rather, it is – as its title means to suggest – a critical examination of the very business of archival knowing itself. Still in its early stages, the site also promises to make space for a range of user response and involvement, from commentary to actual editing and page creation, and for future collaboration with tribal communities.

The creation of such critical portals is one approach to decolonizing indigenous archives. Another is known as 'digital repatriation', whereby libraries, museums and other heritage institutions create electronic surrogates of items that are then theoretically available to the source communities that created them. A model is *Gibagadinamaagoom*, led by the American Philosophical Society's (APS) Timothy B. Powell, one of the most thoughtful scholars working with indigenous digital archives today.[7] Like *Performing Archive*, this site is nascent, but it has taken almost the opposite approach: instead of uploading primary documents and curatorial essays first, with the intent of making space for Native input later, *Gibagadinamaagoom* has so far uploaded only one item – a birchbark drawing of a thunderbird, an important figure in Ojibwe cosmology – and given the lion's share of the space to the voices of Ojibwe elders. The *first* thing a site user encounters is the long Ojibwe title, with an mp3 file of that word being spoken, and a written explanation that this word means 'to bring to life, to sanction, to give permission'. Instead of the usual thumbnail images and explanatory captions, this site 'features chi-aah ya agg ("wisdom keepers") telling stories and teaching about traditional codes of conduct … in their own language, and on their own cultural terms'.[8] *Gibagadinamaagoom* represents a concerted attempt to indigenize digital space, deliberately defamiliarizing for non-Ojibwe users, and undoubtedly for some Ojibwe too.

Other digital repatriation efforts strive to give indigenous communities greater access to historic materials written *about* them. One of the most sophisticated, the *Yale Indian Papers Project* (*YIPP*), addresses a central problem in the historiography of indigenous New England, specifically: 'a general lack of published primary source

7. *Gibagadinamaagoom* (2012) <http://ojibwearchive.sas.upenn.edu/> [accessed 12 February 2014].
8. Timothy Powell and Larry Aitken, 'Encoding Culture: Building a Digital Archive Based on Traditional Ojibwe Teachings', in *The American Literature Scholar in the Digital Age*, ed. by Amy E. Earhart and Andrew Jewell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 250–74.

materials, despite the existence of thousands of relevant documents'.[9] Coordinating several significant repositories, *YIPP* is building a database of high-quality, open-access facsimiles and annotated transcriptions. Astutely apprehending that it is not enough to create a pdf file of, for instance, an 1830 census of the Mohegan reservation in Connecticut, the *YIPP* is involving tribal historians in the selection, transcription, and – eventually – annotation of these documents. In the long run, the lead scholars hope, 'the consultants' annotations might include Native origin stories, oral sources, and traditional beliefs while also including Euro-American original sources of the same historical event or phenomena, thus offering two kinds of narratives of the past'.[10]

In *Performing Archive*, *Gibagadinamaagoom*, and the *YIPP*, close consultation with indigenous people and space for indigenous interpretation (or at least the intention of such) is key. Everybody working in this area owes a debt to anthropologist Kimberly Christen, who has taken the international conversation around digital repatriation an important step further by creating *Mukurtu*. After many years of fieldwork with an Aboriginal Australian community, Christen wanted to create an electronic catalog of her photographs and videos. Reviewing these images with tribal members, she found that they had deeply nuanced ideas about which images should be shared, and with whom. Some should be seen only within specific kin groups; still others should be made available only to people with particular ritual knowledge. Christen and colleagues translated this model – one that complicates the usual dichotomies of public/private, open/closed – into *Mukurtu*, a free, open source CMS that allows communities to set their own electronic protocols for the sharing, viewing and curation of their materials.

As Christen puts it, 'If the colonial idea of the archive was to collect and store the world's treasures for the betterment of mankind, this emerging Warumungu archive is part of an intimate set of kinship relations and a dynamic socioterritorial network that rubs up against national territorial boundaries and legal structures aimed at protecting indigenous culture'.[11] Allowing tribal relations, rather than the demands of the settler gaze, to structure this archive is what makes it post (or anti-) colonial.[12] This postcolonial archive is self-reflexively emergent and contingent. Non-Warumungu cannot 'visit' it and get complete 'access' to its holdings; rather, they must approach through a portal that, first, cautions them that much of the information is off-limits

9. 'Yale Indian Papers Project Summary', *Yale Indian Papers Project* (2007–) <http://www.library.yale.edu/yipp/> [accessed 12 February 2014].
10. Paul Grant-Costa, Tobias Glaza and Michael Sletcher. 'The Common Pot: Editing Native American Materials', *Scholarly Editing*, 33 (2012). Available at <http://www.scholarlyediting.org/2012/essays/essay.commonpot.html> [accessed 20 May 2013].
11. Kimberly Christen, 'Gone Digital: Aboriginal Remix and the Cultural Commons', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 12.3 (2005), 315–345 (p. 317).
12. Jace Weaver (Cherokee) discusses the indigenous argument that there is nothing 'post' about settler colonialism in 'Indigenousness and Indigeneity', in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), pp. 221–35.

and, second, uses a randomized algorithm to reveal just a 'sliver' of the total archive.[13] With each page refresh, a different sliver appears.[14] Like *Performing Archive*, this project means to prompt critical reflection on settler colonial epistemologies themselves, not to proffer unmediated access to some exotic and primordial Other. It stands against the colonial archive, insofar it compels users to confront their own histories, social positions, and geopolitical locations; and to trouble longstanding colonial mechanisms of knowledge circulation.

Challenges

The emergent, contingent nature of postcolonial digital archives is not purely a philosophical and epistemological matter, however. There are material, financial and practical obstacles to the building of such archives, too. Digital repatriation is fraught business. It is not confined to textual documents; in some cases, electronic copies of everything from sacred masks to architectural structures are being created in the spirit of 'access'. This practice does not (and perhaps cannot) address the physical return of original items taken illegally or unethically from Native communities, although some scholars see it as opening a door to further repatriations.[15] But more to the point, digital repatriation does not, in and of itself, reverse the politics of the original archive. On the contrary, digital repatriation assumes that 'the indigenous archive' is already extant, *somewhere* – and in the biggest digital archives so far, that somewhere is almost always a colonial space: a non-Native museum, university, library or historical society.

No one would dispute that these institutions hold materials of great interest and value to tribal communities. Still, as colonial and ethnographic archives, they tend to contain very different material from those collections built for centuries by indigenous communities themselves. Tribal communities, after all, do *have* archives; they have their *own* practices of selection, storage, curation and memory-making. Tribal members have saved historic letters to colonial officials, diaries, newspaper clippings, and rich community publications like tribal newsletters, histories, dictionaries and children's books. These documents describe the very opposite of the vanishing race: they show tribal people simultaneously embracing modernity and critiquing settler colonialism, asserting their sovereignty, creatively adapting their traditions and

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13. Published as 'Digital Dynamic across Cultures', *Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular*, 2.1 (2006) <http://www.vectorsjournal.org/issues/3/digitaldynamics/> [accessed 5 March 2014]. Mukurtu can also be seen in action at the *Plateau Peoples' Web Portal*, which enlists tribal members in the selection and curation of materials held by Washington State University <http://plateauportal.wsulibs.wsu.edu/html/ppp/index.php> [accessed 12 February 2014].
14. I borrow the term sliver from Verne Harris, archivist for the Nelson Mandela Foundation, who has written, 'The archival record is but a sliver of social memory. It is also but a sliver of the documentary record'. 'The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory and Archives in South Africa,' *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 63–86 (p. 64).
15. See Ruth Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2011), p. 287.

communities. They may be professionally catalogued in tribal libraries, boxed up in historic preservation offices awaiting inventorying, or piled high on elders' living-room floors, with oral history as their finding aids.

In recent decades, indigenous people worldwide have moved to preserve and maintain this information for their own purposes. In the USA, the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums (ATALM) was incorporated in 2010 to ensure that every tribal nation will have its own archive, library and museum to house locally its historical photographs, literature, songs, stories and language recordings; its treaty documents, legal histories, historical data, ethnographies and traditional information pertaining to each tribe. This critical body of knowledge along with oral traditions and traditional art and artifacts will be preserved and made readily accessible in a central locale and in a culturally appropriate manner. Materials will be housed in appropriate facilities and managed by professionally trained staff, thereby ensuring the political and cultural survival of tribal peoples in the twenty-firstst century and beyond.[16]

At the same time, an ATALM survey has found that although digitization is now the industry standard for libraries and archives, more than half of their respondents are not digitizing anything. Even those tribes fortunate enough to have a designated archival space and/or a paid historic preservation officer face grievous shortages in funding and staff. In theory, tools like *Mukurtu*, which are free and relatively easy to use, should be a boon to community archiving, designed as they are for easy, standards-based public history-making, but community uptake of these tools has been relatively slow, generally dependent on someone with a salary (usually a university-based scholar) to keep them going.

Here we confront what Povinelli calls 'the material conditions that allow something to be archived and archivable'.[17] Where I work, in the northeastern USA, many tribal archives are unavailable, even to tribal members; they may be housed in inaccessible locations, or incompletely inventoried (or uninventoried, as donated boxes of elders' papers wait for volunteers to review them). Many are at serious risk of deterioration or loss. Some elders who have been prolific writers – for local newspapers, for nonprofits and for their own enjoyment – cannot find copies of all their own work for republication. Others would like to digitize and share some of the newspaper clippings they have saved over the years, but lack a reliable internet connection. Still others share historic photographs on *Facebook*, but have no support for long-term data storage. One family-run museum in a remote rural area has suffered flooding, and a series of funding disappointments. Few to none of these collections have been the beneficiaries of large grants from entities like the National Endowment for the Humanities, which (for understandable reasons) favour collections that have already been professionally catalogued and curated, and that

16. *Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums* <http://www.atalm.org/> [accessed 7 March 2014]. For more on worldwide efforts in indigenous archives, see *Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums: Preserving Our Language, Memory, and Lifeways*, ed. by Loriene Roy, Anjali Bhasin and Sarah K. Arriaga (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2011).
17. Povinelli, 'The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall', p. 152.

will be fully open to the public. In library parlance, these materials are 'discoverable', a term whose irony will hopefully not be lost on readers of this essay about indigenous cultural heritage.

The barriers to digitizing indigenous history are therefore not solely about the need to tread carefully with indigenous intellectual property, although that is certainly a critical part of the picture. These barriers reflect an ongoing and in some cases worsening digital divide: between those who have broadband access and those who don't, between those who can apply for funding because they can demonstrate 'viability' and those who cannot. Just as Adeline Koh, Amy Earhart and others have found Digital Humanities quickly 'retrenching' around canonical figures and analytics, so too are current efforts to digitize indigenous heritage seeming to gravitate toward colonial collections and figures.[18] Because Edward Curtis is so omnipresent, he is certainly worthy of critical analysis; but because we spend so much time analysing him, he becomes more omnipresent. Yale certainly holds valuable materials about indigenous history; but because those materials are already 'knowable', they have access to resources not enjoyed by those produced and curated by indigenous people themselves – those deemed 'unknowable'.

Tools such as *Mukurtu* hold great promise for registering 'the endurance of the otherwise within', as Povinelli might say.[19] But the same foundations that eagerly support the development of such tools will also need to pay indigenous people for their critical knowledge and expertise in putting them to the best use.

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18. 'Can Information Be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon', in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* <http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/16> [accessed 5 March 2014].
19. Povinelli, 'The Woman on the Other Side of the Wall', p. 152.