

Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies

Volume 8

Article 1

Review of Seeking a New Life for Indigenous Archives

Natalia Kovalyova

UT Austin, natashakovalyova@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kovalyova, Natalia () "Review of Seeking a New Life for Indigenous Archives," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/1>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.

Ivy Schweitzer and Gordon Henry Jr., eds. *Afterlives of Indigenous Archives: Essays in Honor of the Occom Circle*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2019.

Much like other cultural heritage institutions that position themselves as keepers of the tradition, archives are rarely viewed as hotbeds of radical change. Yet, a question of *whose* traditions they are keeping often plants a seed of transformation otherwise unimaginable. One such query regarding indigenous materials in nonindigenous institutions has taken root and developed into a full-fledged movement across libraries, archives, special collections, historical societies, and similar institutions, urging them to acknowledge questionable acquisitions of many indigenous objects in their care and to remedy the situation accordingly. As these institutions respond by repatriating indigenous objects, training staff to care for them, and providing differentiated access to them, they often face the need to reimagine an indigenous archive along lines that would not imitate the organizational patterns and practices of Western repositories. The viability of such a vision is supported by the fact that indigenous communities had been preserving their archival materials (for instance, their sacred scrolls) for generations before the first European-style archive was established on American soil. There are supports in other quarters as well.

Afterlives of Indigenous Archives: Essays in Honor of the Occom Circle continues the conversation in cultural heritage institutions about a myriad of unresolved issues that emerge out of centuries-long practices of representing Native peoples and telling their stories. It resonates with Amy Lonetree's *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), which explores how museums can recognize and respect indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing. It also dovetails with a collection edited by Camille Callison, Loriene Roy, and Gretchen Alice LeCheminant titled *Indigenous Notions of Ownership and Libraries, Archives and Museums* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) whose twenty-two articles interrogate the legacy of colonial control over indigenous heritage. Among other related work on decolonialization in the archives is *Alva Ixtlilxochitl's Native Archive and the Circulation of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico* by Amber Brian (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016); Cheryl Beredo's *Import of the Archive: U.S. Colonial Rule of the Philippines and the Making of American Archival History* (Sacramento, Calif.: Litwin Books, 2013); David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson's *The Silence of the Archive* (London, UK: Facet "stet", 2017), sharing the British perspective; and Jeannette Bastian's *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Conn. and London, UK: Libraries Unlimited, 2003), to name a few publications that challenge long-taken-for-granted practices in nonindigenous archives. **<Au: Please supply places of publication throughout.>< Done, Facet Publishing is correct as it is>**

Thirteen essays in *Afterlives of Indigenous Archives*, assembled and edited by Ivy Schweitzer and Gordon Henry Jr., collectively respond to the call to reconsider the archive and to reinstate the principles on which indigenous archives can be established and the practices that could sustain them. The volume draws on the papers and presentations delivered at the "Indigenous Archives in the Digital Age" conference organized by Dartmouth College in September 2016. In addition to a print edition published by the Dartmouth College Press, a free open-access copy of the book is available via Dartmouth Digital Commons. With that, it succeeds beautifully in the first part of its mission—raising awareness of the inadequate treatment of indigenous objects and records—and

shares the core objective of contemporary archivists to enable and broaden access to the materials in their holdings. But the volume underdelivers on the practical side of offering an outline of concrete steps for processing archivists to follow.

The title for the collection derives from a foreword authored by Melanie Benson Taylor, who questions the location of memory outside human bodies and, following Gordon Henry, disavows the view of the archive as something stable and final, thus affirming it instead as a “perpetual site of struggle,” an oscillation “between the dust of irrelevance and the sign of regeneration” (xi). In this view, archival research—what she specifically calls the *afterlife* of an archive—is transformative rather than corrective or gap-filling, affecting researchers well before it translates into their published reports: “These, then, are the afterlives of the archive: in texts and bodies that function broadly and encyclopedically as storehouses of knowledge and culture, who register the inevitable infections of being in the lived world, and who translate that experience in difficult, impacted, sometimes grotesque ways” (xiii).

The volume is introduced by Ivy Schweitzer, who revisits the Foucauldian notion of political power as being inconceivable without the archive. Schweitzer points out that the Western archival tradition is linked to the rise of the nation-state and that its claims to neutrality, objectivity, and comprehension are contestable (1). To the realm of other false beliefs and archival myths belong the ideas of harmony among archival records and the absence of clashes among the voices and truths they contain. In fact, Schweitzer writes, the disbalance of power between oral and written traditions and the overall privileging of writing as a technology of preservation allowed imperial powers to control native populations as they “unacknowledged” indigenous forms of writing, found them “exotic and ahistorical,” and declared them unacceptable as a form of evidence (3). The power of the archives established by European settlers was grounded in Latinized alphabets and a Western understanding of literacy, and only recently has digital technology started to be seen as capable of “preserv[ing] and disseminat[ing] Indigenous languages, literatures, and cultures in ways that are not based on the Euro-American tradition of print culture” (4).

From the introduction, the narrative arc of the volume runs through three parts: Critiques, Methods, and Interventions, which take the reader from conceptual ideas and frameworks at the institutional level (Critiques) through a series of case studies (Methods) toward projections of future indigenous archives (Interventions). Quite in line with the prevailing trend in the archival field, the latter is linked to digital tools.

Part 1—“Critiques”—opens with a contribution by Timothy B. Powell (chap. 1), who questions the “whiteness” of archival collections and upholds the digital realm as a means of trespassing the boundaries and limitations of Western-style archives by recognizing dance, regalia, songs, and oral traditions as legitimate archival media. Powell’s emphasis on collaboration with the elders in designing digital archives is reiterated by Jennifer R. O’Neal (chap. 2), who advocates for “centering” traditional knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing in the already existing archival paradigm. She finds that “centering” of storytelling, dreaming, and intergenerational experience—all linked to land, ceremony, sacred history, and language—is best achieved by acknowledging their historical context and relationality (50). Her archival experience has led her to conceptualize the pillars of “centering” as follows:

I have determined that the one unifying factor in ensuring a successful collaboration for both Tribal and non-Tribal participants is making collaboration, stewardship, respect, reciprocity and reconciliation the key anchors of Indigenous knowledge systems and relationship building that honors sovereignty. . . . This means entering into these relationships with purpose, intent, and with the goal of making a significant social change and, most importantly, putting Indigenous communities and traditional knowledge at the center of the work, driving the project. (50)

While no centering workflow has yet been created, O’Neal insists that archivists should start working toward that goal without waiting until all the processing details are spelled out.

Continuing the conversation on the tenets of imperialist thought that linger at Western-style archives, be they analog or digital, Ellen Cushman (chap. 3) emphasizes that indigenous objects, often involuntarily extracted from their contexts to be placed into archives, should be returned to the contexts of their use and as close as possible to the daily practices from which they derive meanings. She reports on the Indigenous Language Manuscript Translation Project and shares a protocol that archivists should follow to stand a better chance of undoing the hegemonic vision of the colonized population frequently upheld by translations (75–76). **<Au: What is the “indigenous languages project”? And should this be capitalized (is it the proper name of a project)?>< fixed>** Cushman also reiterates the need to consider the intellectual ownership of indigenous materials before engaging in their rescue. She specifically emphasizes that “permission to translate these selected documents depends on the culturally sensitive nature of the content in the document and the authority of the translator as already defined by the Nations” (66). In other words, the fragility or rapid decomposition of materials, which is frequently referenced to warrant their urgent digitization, does not cancel requirements on access to those materials that might exist in the community and that should be extended to digital copies. Notes Cushman, “Any platform for archiving, curating, and publishing tribal documents and cultural heritage materials must handle issues of access with great sensitivity both to the nature of the materials themselves and to the role and perspective of contributors, readers, and users” (74).

Echoing Cushman’s warning, Christine DeLucia (chap. 4) draws the readers’ attention to many Western archival practices that have proven detrimental to indigenous communities such as a logic of collecting that disconnects knowledge from indigenous communities and allows “entrepreneurial outsider[s]” to misconstrue heritage resources (80). She also remarks on the effects of Western systems of classification, on the use of vertical files, and on relatively recent photocopying policies that further solidify settlers’ ownership over indigenous materials.

Part 2—“Methods”—starts with Thomas Peace (chap. 5) discussing Dartmouth College’s digital collections of indigenous materials. He foregrounds the college’s colonial legacy of schooling indigenous children, one of the expressions that European colonialism took in North America (104). Interestingly, unlike their European counterparts, colonial schools did not effectively connect their indigenous alumni into an extended network, nor did they apparently offer such alumni a profound “formative experience” (107). Instead, within indigenous networks, schools made only one—although undoubtedly important—node whose influence overlapped with influences from other nodes. From this example Peace draws the conclusion that in order to establish a platform for undoing dominance and control over indigenous objects in nonindigenous

collections, one has to reconsider the notion of power. Peace suggests conceptualizing it as power *with* and power *to* instead of power *over*.

Presenting research conducted in two archival collections (both housed in the New-York Historical Society), Kelly Wisecup (chap. 6) highlights the difficulties of capturing speech by written means, most specifically the poor fit of the English system of phonetic transcription to the sounds of indigenous languages. She demonstrates the inadequacies of those means citing text annotations made by Cherokee scholar John Ridge and points out that despite their obvious flaws and outright failures, Latinized records were widely used in enacting land-use policies and “arranging” Native people in space. Explains Wisecup, “In the Southeast, the Indian agents tasked with the responsibility of transforming Native sustenance practices as part of the so-called civilization policy were also the men on whom Jefferson and, by extension, Du Ponceau and Gallatin relied for word lists. In particular, Benjamin Hawkins, the Indian agent to the Muskogees or Creeks who also worked extensively with the Cherokees and Choctaws, played a key role in these tribes’ adoption of Western agricultural practices” (127).

Marie Balsley Taylor (chap. 7) continues the conversation on indigenous networks by highlighting the importance of extended kinship to Native communities in general and to indigenous diplomacy in particular. Consequently, when analyzing archival documents, she recommends considering kinship as one of the contextual factors that undergirds indigenous narratives and accounts. However, unearthing kinship ties in archival documents is a complicated task since both kinship and text are governed by conventions but only the latter is supported by Western writing practices and further bolstered by prominent literary critics and discourse analysts. Explains Taylor:

When we look closer at the accounts of Wequash, we can see that the obfuscation of kinship ties in these early conversion accounts is rooted in the generic conventions anchoring the narratives—conventions that must be acknowledged if we want to fully understand the colonial aims that undergird these accounts. When describing some of the methodological considerations necessary for analyzing archival documents, literary theorist Charles Bazerman reminds us that “Making sense of a single claim, sentence, or even datum requires an understanding of what kind of text it appears in, engaged in what sort of inquiry using what methods, and where it stands within the evolving intertextual discussion of the field. (145)

Extending the conversation regarding divergent ideas of writing, literacy, and orality, Susan Paterson Glover (chap. 8) addresses indigenous networks of literacy and communication in northern Canada of the nineteenth century and upholds the role of Cree syllabic materials in those networks. Unfortunately, those materials currently face a growing challenge of access as many young Moose Cree speakers cannot read the old script, and therefore cannot easily access their heritage documents without help from elders who are still able to do so. This leads the author to contemplate a near future when Cree materials might turn into “another of the worlds we have lost” even if they are digitized (168). Moreover, notes Glover, digitization is likely to bring additional concerns: “The digital medium appears to offer at least a partial solution to the problem of physical access, allowing for a much wider readership, but brings its own challenges of deracination, loss of control of access and textual integrity, and a further removal from any land-text nexus that might locate meaning” (164).

Gordon Henry (chap. 9) approaches the major task of reimagining the Native archive by focusing on curatorial subjectivity. He notes that since historical identities, at least partially, depend on the archive, the identity-building narratives of the Native presence and survivance hinge on the relationship between curators and the curated. Using various tools and techniques, archivists gather tangible proofs of the existence of the Native past and produce what Henry calls a layered curation (174). Often, these efforts result in “suturing” different cultural forms as was the case with Anishinaabe songs reinscribed as lyric poetry (177). Such instances lead Henry to suggest that curated texts (and published texts especially) might present first and foremost a history of losses, with some hope that select cultural forms would resist annihilation and eventually survive.

Part 3 of the book—“Interventions”—reports on projects that have implemented specific techniques or used particular digital tools. For instance, chapter 10 describes digitization of the Occom Circle Papers—the documents written by and about Samson Occum (1723-1792), a Mohegan Indian, a Presbyterian minister, intertribal leader, and important Indian writer. The project uses the TEI schema to mark up transcriptions, present a diplomatic version of documents alongside their versions with modernized and normalized spelling, and allow scholars to search these handwritten materials in novel ways. **<Au: Perhaps briefly explain what the Occom Circle is.>**Chapter 11 reports a language revival project for Anishinaabemovin that made archival audios accessible to the community as no one speaks the language at home any longer and school has become a principal place for language instruction and key to language revival and maintenance.

Upholding the importance of digital projects, Damian Baca (chap. 12) calls on digital humanists to pay closer attention to nonalphabetic systems and encourages them to deploy the technical affordances of the graphic user interface to explore literacy practices that are not based on Western norms and patterns of reading and writing. To advance the design of such alternative systems, he outlines a series of steps for nonalphabetic writing projects to follow as they develop.

In a closing chapter, Jason Edward Lewis (chap. 13) turns to the idea of crafting innovations in computational ecosystems that currently admit “only certain kinds of information as data” and that recognize only a small, “impoverished” subset of operations out of a multitude enacted by humans in their daily life (219). As digital innovations proliferate, Lewis cautions the reader against old biases that often remain lodged in the new, increasingly complex systems (220). Humans, he observes, do not understand very well the very machines they create:

Because we created them, we think we should know how to tune into the stations on which our machine creations communicate. Yet we are only now waking up to the corruptions permeating all levels of the stack. Our difficulties in articulating the ontology of increasingly complex computational processes, and our inability to foresee the results of these complex processes interacting with one another and with the human and natural world, all point to the conclusion that we do not actually understand them. (227)

And such a lack of understanding may produce mutual incomprehensibility, which will pave the way to inevitable disaster. These concerns take the work of digital archivists to a new level and

encourage them not only to seek guidance in the how-to manuals and cost-effective workflows but to think broadly about the societal consequences of their engagements.

Although this collection has not elaborated on the concept of the archival afterlife as an embodied existence and left it to stand as a powerful metaphor whose potential might materialize at a later date, it does offer plenty of puzzles to tease out for those who enjoy more theoretical endeavors. Several chapters emphasize the need for joined efforts from both practitioners and conceptual thinkers on such issues as language revival and language instruction (chaps. 3, 7, and 8); understanding of social networks, their composition, configuration, and effects (chaps. 5 and 7); decolonizing initiatives in the archival practices of classification, description, assessment, community engagement, and outreach (chaps. 2, 3, 4, and 9); the benefits and side effects of digitization (chaps. 1, 3, 6, 9, and 13); and many others.

But a most important observation and a most important suggestion for the archivists working in the collections that contain indigenous materials comes from Timothy Powell's story about the 2010 conference organized by the American Philosophical Society (APS) and supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to digitize Native American audio materials. As Powell notes, "Despite the fact that all the right people were assembled, things went wrong almost immediately" (29). Among the "right people" were representatives from indigenous communities, leading scholars, and archivists from major cultural heritage institutions in the United States such as the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution, the Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies at the Newberry Library. Yet, this stellar list of guests was no warranty against attitudes of superiority and the narrow horizon of expectations set on the collaboration with indigenous communities. In fact, emphasizes Powell, no one at the APS anticipated mutually benefits from collaborating with the indigenous participants—an attitude that quickly transcribed in talks and presentations. Fortunately, the tensions were eventually resolved, and communities' contributions helped significantly enhance the metadata (for example, Provigil the names of people in old photographs) and made the APS holdings more valuable to researchers (31). This incident, echoing Thomas Peace (chap. 5) on the need to reconsider power relations in the collection and around it, poses several vital questions: What motivates archives to decolonize? Don't they use an argument about increased access to add to their own prestige, serve their commercial interests, and leverage their political power, again at the expense of the indigenous communities whose records they have made available in digital form? What if the nonindigenous archive decides not to decolonize and continues business as usual? What consequences—if any—does it face?

An impressive range of tools, case studies, and initiatives described in the volume amplifies a call for indigenous communities and nonindigenous institutions to work out ways of working together. It would be naive to believe that their collaboration will miraculously and instantaneously rid Western archives of colonial legacy or that monetary support of many archival projects (especially digital) will soon stop being a critical factor (34). Yet, the volume's roster of successful projects inserts much hope into archival circles and indigenous communities, encouraging them to take advantage of existing opportunities and create new ones.