Introduction: Indigenous Studies in Archives and Beyond: Relationships, Reciprocity, and Responsibilities

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Introduction

Indigenous Studies in Archives and Beyond: Relationships, Reciprocity, and Responsibilities

Jennifer R. O’Neal

In this issue scholars, practitioners, activists, and tribal and Indigenous community members share their incredible work dedicated to honoring and centering Indigenous ways of knowing in their research. The articles are based on presentations shared at the fall 2020 conference hosted by the American Philosophical Society (APS), “Relationships, Reciprocity, and Responsibilities: Indigenous Studies in Archives and Beyond,” which focused on collaborative and innovative research projects from various institutions and repositories related to Native American and Indigenous studies. Though it was originally planned as an in-person gathering, the APS shifted instead to a virtual conference during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles in this issue represent the range of central themes from the conference, including Indigenous communities’ and scholars’ long-standing efforts to preserve Indigenous knowledge systems through language revitalization, establish Indigenous archives, develop tribal research protocols, repatriate collections, connect to land, collaborate with non-Native institutions, and cultivate new generations of Indigenous scholars in various fields of higher education.

This conference gathering and the resulting volume of papers reflect the important changes occurring in various fields in the academy as institutions and researchers engage in innovative
community-engaged projects that center and celebrate Indigenous history, culture, and ways of knowing. Most importantly, these essays reflect the value of honoring the cultural, intellectual, and political sovereignty of Indigenous peoples by reconnecting, restoring, and returning collections to Native Nations and Indigenous communities. The articles here highlight lessons learned from respectful and ethical collaboration, especially slowing down the process to ensure research and language projects center relationships and reciprocity with and responsibility toward Indigenous communities.

The community-engaged projects presented reflect the larger shift over the past decade of institutions and researchers collaborating and building respectful relationships with Native American and Indigenous people whose collections they steward or with whom they want to conduct research. This much-needed change in curatorial and research practices comes from an awakening and reckoning by non-Indigenous curators and researchers in various academic disciplines to decolonize and unsettle past colonial, paternalistic collecting and research practices that displaced, disassociated, and disconnected collections from Indigenous communities. With this sense of responsibility come innovative projects that show the depth, beauty, and importance of engaging in collaborative projects to reconnect Indigenous peoples with collections. This shift is also due in part to the implementation of Indigenous research methods curriculum and training in undergraduate and graduate programs, where non-Indigenous academics are increasing their understanding and knowledge of centering Indigenous ways of knowing in their research and curatorial practices. This turn toward decolonial practices also stems from an increasing number of Native American and Indigenous people working in repositories and the academy, including tribal leaders, who lead these projects. As well, reciprocal action by institutions requires consulting with Indigenous communities to provide expertise and guide the projects from inception to ongoing sustainability, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives and sovereignty are honored.

Relationality

Grounding this work is the ongoing dedication of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to bring awareness of and find
solutions to the effects of colonization in Indigenous communities. These effects, as highlighted by Tuscarora scholar Rahnekwê:rih Montgomery Hill in his article “Decolonial Language Revitalization on Tuscarora Nation Territory,” caused the loss of memories, practices, customs, knowledge, and language. Hill highlights the reality of the loss of language in his community but balances that with a plea to scholars to reevaluate labeling Indigenous languages as extinct, dead, or sleeping. Rather, he wants the narrative to instead turn toward focusing on how Indigenous scholars, practitioners, and language learners can “bridge the gap,” utilizing linguistic analysis for revitalization while also strengthening the Indigenous language-speaking community on the ground. In essence, how can scholars collaborate and connect with Indigenous communities to make a larger impact and ensure it is based on the humanity and daily life of Indigenous peoples? This argument points to the larger goal and theme of the issue centered on the responsibility of building respectful and reciprocal relationships between scholars and Indigenous communities where research prioritizes Indigenous culture, heritage, and ways of knowing. Authors demonstrate that this goal should be grounded in holism and humanity—meaning that the work should be about not just the research but also the interrelatedness of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical, which is connected to family, community, band, and nation. Holism is the foundation for relationality that is central to all Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

In her article “Indigenous Relational Methodologies and Archives,” Johannah Bird builds on the theme of relationality by sharing her own archival stories as an Indigenous researcher and highlighting the significance of reconnecting Indigenous peoples to physical archives. Reflecting on her own research experiences, she explores how archival practices and procedures build relation or (dis)relation for Indigenous researchers to homeland and place, offering instead alternative examples of relationality. While there has been a significant move toward the digital return and use of Indigenous collections as a solution for both access and reconciliation, Bird instead calls for the physical use of archival collections, which allows tangible contact and connection with

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items. According to Bird, this reliance on digital technology, while providing access of a certain kind, mediates the interactions, can feel extractive, and erases the benefit of connection and being in relation with the materials from Indigenous communities. Bird highlights the power dynamics that can also arise when using collections in institutional and archival spaces and hopes for a “decolonial sensibility” through integration of Indigenous perspectives and relational methodologies.

Responsibilities

Represented in this issue is meaningful research highlighting a dedication by both academics and Indigenous community partners to bring awareness of the cultural, social, and political injustices faced by Indigenous peoples across the globe. In their article “Maya Testimonies in the Archive: Violence, Linguistics, and Historical Memory,” Brigitte M. French and Lolmay Pedro García Matzar collaborate to transcribe, represent, and analyze genocide-survivor testimonies from Maya-Kaqchikel ethnolinguistic communities in Guatemala. Advancing both scholarly and political projects, the authors argue that the linguistic analysis of survivor testimonies document and support Indigenous human and cultural rights. They urge that these types of projects “must be based upon an explicit commitment to strengthening Indigenous communities and their self-determination.” Indeed, French and García’s work is dedicated to not only the study but also the dissemination of these firsthand experiences of war, trauma, survival, and resilience “to advance and deepen understandings of the violence of the past and its enduring legacies, particularly from Indigenous perspectives that often have been erased, silenced, or disregarded in public discourse both domestically and internationally.” They do so as a responsibility to Indigenous self-determination and in the service of building “more democratic and inclusive futures in the country, and indeed around the globe.”

Seeing a responsibility to connect undergraduate students with meaningful linguistics projects, the research teams at the Goldfields Aboriginal Language Centre in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, and the Yale University linguistics program serve as an example of developing linguistic bootcamps to produce materials
that is of use to Aboriginal communities in Australia. In the essay “Revitalization at a Distance: Engaging Digital Archives for Language Reclamation,” Claire Bowern, Sue Hanson, Denise Smith-Ali, and George Hayden highlight their collaborative reclamation project, which aims to augment existing community language work and provide undergraduate students with in-depth training in language documentation. Their linguistic bootcamps examine language fieldnotes to make archival resources “more easily usable by Aboriginal communities in their language programs.” They offer a specific example of remote collaboration based on the specific needs of two language centers—Goldfields and Noongar Boodjar Language Centre, both in Western Australia. Partnering with undergraduate students in the Yale University linguistics program provided the chance to both learn the nuances of conducting sketch grammar from existing materials and connecting with and learning from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal linguists who have dedicated their careers to the preservation of language. This long-distance linguistic-centered model of language description supplies resources lessons for teachers while simultaneously connecting undergraduates with Aboriginal archival materials, community partners, and linguists. While this might not work for all Indigenous communities, it is one example of what is possible if it fits the needs of programs, repositories, and linguistics.

Reciprocity

Another major theme reflected in these essays is reciprocity, which is a continuous and intentional exchange process that is grounded in “the belief that as we receive from others, we must also offer to others.” Reciprocity is crucial in collaborative projects between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities as it allows all parties involved in the projects “to engage in a continuous dynamic relationship where they are provided equal responsibility to negotiate relationship building and where resources (i.e., archival collections, research outcomes) are considered important gifts.”

In “Consultation, Collaboration, and Consent: Decolonizing and Indigenizing Archival Research,” Kelsey T. Grimm and Krystiana L. Krupa build upon and offer decolonial practices as an alternative to traditional Western modes of collecting, managing, and researching Native American materials, including consultation through and outside the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Using collections at Indiana University Bloomington as a case study, they argue that archive and museum institutions and practitioners must collaborate with Native American and Indigenous communities to discuss, determine, and implement best practices for description, access, and research. Applying both decolonization and indigenization in their examination and application, they share specific tribally driven collaborative projects that stem from meaningful consultations between Native nations, such as Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma and the Wyandotte Nation, and the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, including complex considerations for NAGPRA connected to archival collections. They rightly emphasize that “the inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledges are the only way to move forward in the long process of decolonizing and Indigenizing these archives.” Centering Indigenous voices in turn builds trust and understanding based on meaningful conversations about not just the collections but also the Indigenous values and stories connected to the materials. The examples shared center Indigenous perspectives and the reciprocal collaborative partnerships fostered between the Native nations and the university, thus building bridges between both parties for mutual concerns and shared understanding on all sides. Grimm and Krupa, both non-Indigenous professionals, describe their experiences and lessons learned to both inspire and provide specific strategies so that other researchers and professionals in colonially structured spaces can implement changes honoring Indigenous sovereignty.

Further adding to this conversation on reciprocity, an incredible team of scholars document a process of language revitalization and a path for digital repatriation of archival materials in their article, “Returning Forgotten Voices: Indigenous Language

Documentation and Revitalization in Oaxaca, Mexico.” Authors Danny Zborover, Aaron Huey Sonnenschein, Salvador Galindo Llaguno, and Lorena Córdova-Hernández share their work in the southern state of Oaxaca with the Chontal peoples, specifically the Highland Chontal that are the most traditional of the subgroups based on their geographic location. Due to prior limited linguistic work on this Indigenous community, its status as an endangered language, and lack of available documentary and educational materials, this group collaborated with transnational organizations to bring awareness to this disappearing language. A long-term inter-institutional project focuses on documentation and revitalization of the language through various methods, including “Master-Apprentice” and “Breath of Life,” which assist in recovering a dormant language through the use of archives and historical documents balanced with centering the needs and perspectives of the Indigenous community. The authors share their story of their project, Returning Forgotten Voices / Retornando las Voces a Sus Orígenes, to research, copy, and return copies of rare linguistic and ethnographic recordings held by the American Philosophical Society Library to the Chontal communities. The team’s long-term commitment, detailed research, and strong dedication to Indigenous perspectives ensured that the project centered and incorporated local institutions and cultural protocols. Through in-depth interviews, hosting workshops and cultural events, and the digital return of collections, the authors epitomized the reciprocity needed from scholars and institutions that have benefited from these important Indigenous archives. This project serves to remind scholars of the beauty and inspiration that come from such meaningful collaborations, including new archival collections, landscape projects, songs, and language recordings—created by and for the Indigenous community rather than an institution.

Finally, in their article, “Rowasu’u: An A’uwê-Xavante Community Archive,” Lori M. Jahnke, Rosanna Dent, and James R. Welch reflect on the responsibilities and reciprocities at the core of creating digitized materials, particularly the relationships built through this work. They point out that the explosion of digital material on the one hand increases access, but on the other it creates inequitable power dynamics, especially for Indigenous archives. The authors highlight their project, a collaboration
between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers from three institutions—Rowasu’u, a digital archive project to unite materials from three A’uwẽ-Xavante villages in Central Brazil. Sharing lessons learned, they focus on three themes throughout the essay—incorporating and connecting A’uwẽ-Xavante knowledge in Mukurtu CMS, establishing decision-making authority for access and sharing, and defining creator attribution and cultural heritage. Their findings reveal the benefits of always listening, prioritizing, and incorporating the needs, requests, perspectives, and knowledge systems of Indigenous communities—they are the ones who know this material and know how it should be properly described, managed, and accessed. Moreover, it is a reminder to approach Indigenous community archive projects slowly and deliberately—centering relationships, reciprocity, and responsibility rather than often-embedded capitalistic ideals of efficiency, production, and results.

The articles presented in this issue reflect the value and meaningful benefits of prioritizing collaboration and consultation with Native American and Indigenous peoples as fundamental to the ongoing fight for sovereignty and self-determination of their cultural heritage. In an earlier APS book on Indigenous language archives, I reflected that I imagine a world in the not-so-distant future where Indigenous history and ways of knowing are at the center of research.³ Where we do not have to constantly struggle to explain our complex history of being here since time immemorial and the beautiful culture, traditions, and languages that shape our lives. Where we are respected and given our space to freely practice our cultures, tell our stories, speak our languages, and determine how we want our history and culture preserved for future generations. While all of this still is and will always be the goal, the projects and research represented in this issue give me hope that the academy is changing and that we are seeing substantial transformations in the way that research is being conducted with Indigenous communities. That rather than being extractive and displaced, it is now collective, collaborative work that centers and respects Indigenous sovereignty and protocols. This is by no means to say things are improving everywhere; we still have a very

long way to go after hundreds of years of colonization and dis-
placement of archives, collections, languages, and research from 
our communities. But it is promising to see so many incredible 
changes that are centering Indigenous sovereignty, history, cul-
ture, and ways of knowing. The articles presented in this issue 
reflect the importance of prioritizing collaboration and consulta-
tion with Native American and Indigenous peoples as fundamen-
tal to the ongoing fight for sovereignty and self-determination of 
their cultural heritage.