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Access Challenges Essay
LS558 Archival Representation, Access, and Use
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Access is defined as a permission, liberty, or ability to enter, approach, or pass to and from a place or to approach or communicate with a person or thing; or stated in a different fashion, as the freedom or ability to obtain or make use of something.[1] The framing of access as a freedom or liberty is important, it alludes to the fact that barriers exist, limiting or preventing access. These barriers may be unintentional, organic, or unrecognizable through a privileged gaze, but in many instances, they can be intentional and even nefarious. However, in the end, it is an archivist's responsibility to ensure that the freedom or liberty of access to cultural heritage and the evidence of society is actionable. The importance of access is underscored by fact that the Society of American Archivists (SAA) lists it as the first core value of archival work, stating that "access to records is essential in all personal, community, academic, business, and government settings," and that, "archivists should promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of material."[2] But there are caveats to this mandate, the promotion of the widest possible accessibility of material is dependent upon "respecting legal and ethical access restrictions including public statutes, cultural protections, donor contracts, and privacy requirements." Barriers limiting the scope of our ability to provide access are ever-present and must be considered. Thus, our professional code of ethics states that "access may be justifiably

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[1] "Access Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 10, 2022. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/access.
[2] SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics." SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics | Society of American Archivists. Accessed April 10, 2022. https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics.

limited in some instances," but nevertheless, archivists should still attempt "to foster open access and unrestricted use as broadly as possible when appropriate."[3] The manner in which the SAA has framed our archival core value of access provides a theoretical guide for professional practice but leaves room for conversation around the messiness that is inherently present in the reality of accessibility.

Colonial Collecting: Post-Colonial Consequences

This messiness is undeniably present amongst the dialogue between cultural heritage repositories and Indigenous populations, and manifests in the intersection of divergent knowledge management systems. The history between collecting institutions and Indigenous cultures is long and fraught with imperialistic and colonial complexities, necessitating present-day navigation of differing expectations in the representation, use, and access to Indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge. The collecting of Indigenous artifacts in the United States came to prominence during the late Nineteenth Century. This was due to Native Americans being seen as a dying culture, which is not surprising after enduring more than a century of intentional U.S. government policies of forced displacement, assimilation, and ethnic cleansing. Amplifying this mindset, the Antiquities Act of 1906 provided anthropologists unfettered legal access to Indigenous heritage sites, prompting wholesale collecting by "reputable" museums, universities, archives, and private collectors of Indigenous cultural heritage materials and human remains.[4] Not only were collecting practices problematic, the utilization of Indigenous cultural artifacts

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[3] "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics."
[4] For more information, reference section 3. "American Antiquities Act of 1906 - National Park Service," accessed April 14, 2022, https://www.nps.gov/rabr/learn/management/upload/antiquities-act.pdf.

and human remains in exhibits created a persistent narrative that Native Americans were a historic peoples, discounting their present being and silencing their representational voice.

Colonial collecting practices were a destructive process involving the removal of Indigenous materials from their communities, severing them from local knowledge systems, and perpetrating their continued separation within the confines of a legal system that prevents the stewardship of cultural heritage by the communities from whom materials originated.[5] The majority of Indigenous materials held in collecting repositories are considered within the public domain, which is problematic and incompatible with Indigenous knowledge production systems, and tribal views of circulation and access. Public domain in concept, as described by Patterson and Lindberg, consists of "certain materials – the air we breathe, sunlight, rain, space, life, creations, thoughts, feelings, ideas, words, numbers – not subject to private ownership. The materials that compose our cultural heritage must be free for all living to use no less than matter necessary for biological survival."[6] Legally, residing in the public domain means that any exclusive intellectual property rights have either expired, been forfeited, voluntarily waived, or are not applicable. Add to this legal framework professional standards that outline a core commitment to access, which situates the idea of restricting access on any level as wrong or unethical, and assumptions that the public good equates to open and free access. This can blind "collecting institutions to non-Western systems of information management and circulation that work from and mobilize different understandings of "public," "private," and the like."[7] The lack

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[5] Kimberly Christen, "Tribal Archives, Traditional Knowledge, and Local Contexts: Why the "s" Matters," *Journal of Western Archives 6*, no.1 (2015): 1-19.
[6] Ronan Deazley, *Rethinking Copyright: History, Theory, Language* (Cheltenham: Edward elgar Pub., 2008).
[7] Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," *The American Archivist 7* (Spring-Summer 2011): 185-210.

of recognition of multiple public domains, argues Pamela Samuelson, negates the existence of the wide range of social values within different domains, leading to the perpetuation of the exclusion of, and injustice placed on, Indigeneity.[8] This continued marginalization has instigated a groundswell of decedent Indigenous custodians to seek negotiation of the terms of access and use of Indigenous materials held in collecting repositories, their forms of representation, attributions, and their appropriate use.[9] The digital world of the last twenty years has presented opportunities for redress, and at the same time, has complicated the issues swirling around Indigenous collections. Over this time, collecting institutions have implemented methods, to varying degrees of success, to facilitate the integration of Indigenous models of access and knowledge into mainstream practices to strike a balance in the management and circulation of Indigenous cultural heritage within their overlapping colonial and post-colonial histories.[10]

Digitization and Digital Repatriation

The dispersion of Indigenous cultural artifacts amongst hundreds of repositories is one of the most challenging aspects facing Indigenous nations in the management and preservation of their cultural heritage. As digitization has grown to become a common archival practice, the digitization of Indigenous collections is facilitating a means of return for digital surrogates of cultural materials to their identified communities of origin. The practice is not intended to supplant the physical with the digital, but do provide varied routes for the circulation of knowledge and an alternate dynamic life for physical objects that may "stimulate linguistic or

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[8] Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 189.
[9] Martin Nakata, Vicky Nakata, Gabrielle Gardiner, Jill McKeough, Alex Byrne, and Jason Gibson, "Indigenous Digital Collections: An Early Look at the Organisation and Cultural Interface," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries 39*, no.4 (2013): 223-236.
[10] Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 185.

cultural revivals, spur contention and disagreement, prompt new cultural forms or popular

products, incite new collaborations, and/or forge new types of performances or artistic

creations."[11] However, the layers of differing understandings of access and preservation that

digitized materials are inserted into have complicating effects on this archival diaspora,

manifesting "unique challenges for Indigenous collections that often have associated cultural and

ethnic considerations that may not align easily with the types of circulation and access afforded

by digital preservation strategies."[12] These considerations encompass artifactual associations of a

religious, political, or cultural nature that may be obscured due to it disassociation from its

Indigenous knowledge source. Christen calls forth several examples, traditional cultural

protocols may limit access to an item to a specific clan, certain content may only be appropriate

for women, or a male initiation ceremony may only be viewed by elder men.[13] So, while

digitization is often undertaken to further collection accessibility, it is imperative that

repositories are cognizant of the unique considerations of access and use attached to Indigenous

materials.

To mitigate the effects of our professional ethics, deeply rooted in open access, that

impose barriers to diverse and alternative views of openness, and our opposition to censorship,

which we view as detrimental to the public good, we must not prevent the implementation of

"cultural protocols aimed at maintaining specific types of knowledge in a world characterized by

human differences."[14] One tool created to assist the navigation of these concerns is a diverse,

multi-authored document, the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, that presents

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[11] Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 187.
[12] Kimberly Christen, "Tribal Archives, Traditional Knowledge, and Local Contexts: Why the "s" Matters," 1.
[13] Kimberly Christen, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 186.
[14] Kimberly Christen quoting Alex Byrne, Ibid., 191.

aspirational goals and is intended to foster increased collaboration between tribal and nontribal archives.[15] One form of collaboration sought by Indigenous nations is the ability to enhance archival records with their own cultural specific metadata and descriptive narratives. As Peter Toner posits,

> It is obvious that the fundamental categories of metadata schemes like Dublin Core are based on Western systems of knowledge management. As archives work increasingly with indigenous communities on the repatriation of digitized cultural heritage materials, with a clear aim of local knowledge management, we must expand the categories of metadata to include culturally significant styles and types of knowledge.[16]

Mukurtu archive software is a tool that has developed out of this changing archival landscape that facilitates reciprocal curation of Indigenous collections. Developed by the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University, the project is meant to empower communities to manage the access and contextualization of "their digital heritage in a culturally relevant and ethnically-minded ways."[17] The platform provides Indigenous communities control of item-level access to digital heritage materials to ensure alignment with their specific cultural protocols. Additionally, tribal knowledge can be attached to third-party or public domain materials utilizing Traditional Knowledge (TK) Labels that provide value added information about access, use, circulation, and attribution. By allowing both scholars and tribes to annotate on an item-level within Indigenous

[15] "Protocols for Native American Archival Materials," accessed April 14, 2022, https://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/.

[16] Kimberly Christen quoting Peter Toner, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 193.

[17] "About," Mukurtu CMS, April 6, 2022, https://mukurtu.org/about/.

collections, contextually rich layers of knowledge are injected into archival holdings. This is achieved by granting tribal knowledge the same authority as institutional Dublin Core metadata.[18]

Archival access connects one to the evidence of society and its cultural heritage but should also facilitate one's access into the archive to be counted amongst its representation. One approach to redressing the issues of Indigenous representational access is seen in the Australian Research Council-funded project, Trust and Technology: Building Archival Systems for Oral Memory.[19] The project is meant to counter the traditional positioning of Indigenous peoples as the subjects of study within the official archival record, which has constructed for Indigenous peoples a disempowering structure built upon surveillance, control, and dispossession.[20] By circumventing the acknowledged problematics associated with metadata schemes built upon Western knowledge systems, the Trust and Technology project has built a framework that can "accommodate multiple and plural perspectives on the record and its context, support participatory management models, and enable people and communities, once considered the subjects of the records, to add their perspectives and stories."[21] This embraces the concept of community records put forth in Mukurtu; that there is rarely one story or one way of knowing cultural heritage materials, but by providing space for layered narratives and traditional knowledge ensures that history can be contextualized more wholistically and ethically.[22] The initiative differs from others by focusing mainly on

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[18] Kimberly Christen quoting Peter Toner, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 193.
[19] Sue McKemmish, Shannon Faulkhead, and Lynette Russell, "Distrust in the Archive: Recording Records," Archival Science 11, (2011): 211-239.
[20] Ibid., 218.
[21] Ibid., 230.
[22] "About," Mukurtu CMS, April 6, 2022, https://mukurtu.org/about/.

records of Indigenous peoples created by non-Indigenous organizations and building

connections between these records and Indigenous knowledge sources. This provides

Indigenous people the power "to set the record straight," through the contribution of family

and individual narratives that illustrate Indigenous versions of events alongside official

versions.[23] To facilitate these contributions, the project relies on oral knowledge sharing, a

more trusted method of knowledge transmission amongst the Indigenous peoples

represented in the records. By layering oral contributions upon the official event, the project

mimics their dynamic storytelling traditions.[24]

Making Accessibility Meaningful

Access is multi-dimensional, it "goes beyond physical access to archival materials

and involves making meaningful use of those materials," and as Indigenous peoples

incrementally gain more accessibility to their cultural history, cultural heritage professionals

must ensure Indigenous communities are not barred from the interpretation of publicly

displayed materials, both physically and virtually.[25] Repositories should strive to respect the

Indigenous desire to not have their knowledge recorded in ways that marginalizes their

history or diminishes their vested interests in collections that contain their cultural histories.

We must acknowledge that "history is made, unmade, and negotiated over time," thus,

records are malleable and susceptible to change.[26] I believe archivists have a professionally

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[23] Sue McKemmish, Shannon Faulkhead, and Lynette Russell, "Distrust in the Archive: Recording Records," 231.
[24] Ibid., 232.
[25] Kimberly Christen quoting Krause and Yakel, "Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation," 197.
[26] Ibid., 201.

moral obligation to acknowledge the ethics swirling around Indigenous accessibility and representation. Past injustices should be redressed and can be achieved by opening the archive to accommodate the diverse and dynamic needs of the historically marginalized. The archival profession is duty bound to take the emerging practices that are enabling Indigenous annotation and control and build new standardized archival frameworks and metadata systems that will accommodate the multitude of diverse perspectives and contextualization upon records that is necessary to ensure archival access is democratized.