

# FROM DOCUMENTS TO PEOPLE: *Working Towards Indigenizing the BC Archives*

---

GENEVIEVE WEBER

## INTRODUCTION

IN 2015, THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION Commission of Canada (TRC) issued ninety-four calls to action – policy and program recommendations created to promote the reconciliation of Indigenous and settler societies in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Although a small number of these are specifically aimed at Canadian museums and archives, many of the calls indirectly affect the work that archivists do. One thing is clear from reading the calls to action: they are about people. Although each call addresses an area of weakness in policy or common practice, the outcomes are intended to benefit people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Embedded within the mandate of the TRC and its calls to action is an understanding of the contradictory power of archives: as deeply colonial institutions, archives have the ability to choose which voices are heard. They have the power to shape history and determine which stories are learned by future generations and which are forgotten.<sup>2</sup> They can also choose which version of the story is preserved: “Archives power includes the power to hurt through derogatory, colonial and hateful words.”<sup>3</sup> The imbalance of power in the official record illustrates the disenfranchisement and disinheritance of Indigenous rights.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, archives also have the ability to give evidence, to raise awareness and share the burden, and the potential to heal through understanding the past, and in this way they are also “pathways for Indigenous people and communities to recognize injustice and begin to heal, and for Indigenous

---

<sup>1</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Rodney G.S. Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence,” *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 216.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Bak, Tolly Bradford, Jessie Loyer, and Elizabeth Walker, “Four Views on Archival Decolonization Inspired by the TRC’s Calls to Action,” *Fonds d’Archives* 1 (2017): 17.

<sup>4</sup> J.J. Ghaddar, “The Spectre in the Archive: Truth, Reconciliation, and the Indigenous Archival Memory,” *Archivaria* 82 (Fall 2016): 6.

and non-Indigenous peoples to begin the difficult work of reconciliation and decolonization.”<sup>5</sup>

The TRC report, in combination with a shift in attitude regarding Indigenous-settler relationships among the Canadian population in general,<sup>6</sup> has resulted in an increased awareness among archivists of the importance and challenges of caring for records relating to Indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, the main concern of official archives has been to protect and preserve records. Records serve as a vehicle to relay information about an event, decision, or action. Once the event is complete, the record provides evidence that it happened. Keeping the record safe and unchanged ensures that the integrity of the record – and therefore the comprehension of the event that it depicts – remains intact. Thus, the keeper of the record – the archivist – is responsible for ensuring that the record remains safe and unchanged for the purpose of providing evidence of past events.<sup>8</sup> Protection of the record is, for most institutions, the primary concern. Access to records is secondary. However, it is increasingly recognized that if the records are not accessible, their integrity cannot be proven and any evidence they might hold is worthless. This is especially the case with records relating to Indigenous peoples.

Many institutions, including the BC Archives, have for some time now realized the value of highlighting their collections based on the interest they may have for researchers studying Indigenous communities, rights, and land use and have worked to improve accessibility to these collections. The BC Archives maintains a reference guide dedicated to assisting researchers in finding records according to theme or subject matter, and this makes it much easier to find documents related to Indigenous people. It should be noted, however, that most of the records listed in the BC Archives guide were created *by* settlers *about* Indigenous peoples. Whether ethnographic, governmental, or missionary in purpose, these records thus provide insight into the history of the Indigenous peoples in British Columbia without giving them a voice.<sup>9</sup>

Even when access is paramount – when archives provide extra assistance to find records that could be related to a certain group of people or subject matter – we are not truly considering the human element.

<sup>5</sup> Bak et al., “Four Views on Archival Decolonization,” 17.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Frogner, “The Royal BC Museum and Archives Official Response Regarding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action,” Royal BC Museum, last modified 24 August 2016, [https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/TRC/TRC\\_Projects\\_August\\_2016.pdf](https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/TRC/TRC_Projects_August_2016.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Bak et al., “Four Views on Archival Decolonization,” 1.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eastwood, “What Is Archival Theory and Why Is It Important?” *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 126.

<sup>9</sup> BC Archives, *First Nations Research Guide* (Victoria: BC Archives, August 2016).

Archival practice continues to be centred on documentary records rather than considering the interests of the people whom they are about or who seek to use them. Creating a change in the archives will require shifting this focus and realizing that archives are, by their very nature, about people. Records cannot be created without people; their subject matter has no substance in the absence of humanity; they must be viewed by people; and their existence affects people and communities in a multitude of unseen ways. Recognizing the intrinsic humanity of archives and directing our policies and practices to meet human needs is essential moving forward. It is also necessary to shift our perception of archives from seeing them as the controllers of records to seeing them as the custodians of cultural material. I propose that adopting Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's model outlined in their paper "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives" provides a natural framework for meeting the TRC calls to action within the archival setting.<sup>10</sup> Caswell and Cifor's model explains at a theoretical level how archives are essentially about human relationships. I explore how these relationships operate in practice in the archival community, using the BC Archives as an example. This case study demonstrates that when archivists begin to focus on people over records, it is impossible to ignore the imbalance in power between those controlling the information and the creators, subjects, and communities connected to the information. By engaging in a multitude of relationships, archivists must shed their façade of neutrality and embrace an empathetic approach to their work, taking on a caregiver role, both regarding care of the records and care of the people. As custodians or caregivers, archivists adopt a new position of power: the power to repair past wrongs and to broaden understanding of the lived experiences of all peoples.<sup>11</sup> "For the archive can never be a quiet retreat for professionals and scholars and craftspersons. It is a crucible of human experience, a battleground for meaning and significance, a babel of stories, a place and a space of complex and ever-shifting power-plays."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Robinson-Sweet examines how archivists can facilitate reparations in "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists," *American Archivist* 81, 1 (2018): 23–37; Rebecka Sheffield describes the archivist as a steward of information relating to the histories of marginalized communities in "More Than Acid-Free Folders: Extending the Concept of Preservation to Include the Stewardship of Unexplored Histories," *Library Trends* 64, 3 (2016): 572–84.

<sup>12</sup> Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 85.

## CONTEXTUALIZING THE TRC'S CALLS TO ACTION AT THE BC ARCHIVES

The BC Archives is the provincial repository for the government of British Columbia. Records held by the BC Archives include the official records of both the colonial and provincial governments as well as private records produced by individuals, families, businesses, and organizations. The archives' aim in acquiring these records is to document all aspects of the political, economic, social, and cultural history of the province.

Established in 1908, the BC Archives was initially headed by R.E. Gosnell, a librarian and historian with a passion for collecting. Initially, there was little structure to the archives' organization, but gradually, throughout the 1920s to the 1960s, a more systematic approach was adopted, shaped by several well-known manuals of European and American archival theory, including the *Dutch Manual* (1898) and *The Manual for Archival Administration* (1937). These guides provide structure and rules for the difficult task of managing an ever-growing mass of paper records. With a focus on government documents, their concern is with maintaining the authenticity of the official record; access is considered as a secondary concern, with the assumption that it will be granted mainly to government workers.<sup>13</sup> Private records (as we know them today), or manuscript collections (as they were called in the past), are not considered worthy of equal attention in these manuals.<sup>14</sup>

While otherwise greatly influenced by the manuals' guidelines, the BC Archives has been, since its inception, a conglomeration of these two apparently incongruent collections of papers. Having been born out of a desire to keep the "reminiscences of pioneer settlement ... old letters, journals, files of newspapers, books, pamphlets, reports, charts, maps, photographs, sketches and so on," the BC Archives is a blend of the official and the personal.<sup>15</sup> Records of significance to Indigenous communities are present in both areas.

Examples of records related to Indigenous people held by the BC Archives include provincial government records (such as health, education, court, police, and land records); ethnographic notes and reports created by anthropologists; botanical and other natural science field notes; land use studies; photographs of Indigenous people, communities, ceremonies, and traditional ways of living; correspondence

<sup>13</sup> J.A. Feith, R. Fruin, and S. Muller, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 1968), 98, 100.

<sup>14</sup> Feith, Fruin, and Muller, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> An example of the advertisement appears in the *Inland Sentinel*, 1 June 1894.

and notes between Indigenous artists and their audiences; oral history tapes of Indigenous people and settlers who lived among or worked with Indigenous people; audio recordings of ceremonies, songs, and histories; maps; treaty records; records of reserve commissions; residential school records; pamphlets created by residential school students and staff; and genealogical records. This list, though not comprehensive, illustrates the diversity of information about Indigenous people that is held in the archives.

In caring for both official and personal documents, including those relating to Indigenous people, the practices of the BC Archives are based on early archival theories that rely on a notion of archival neutrality and objectivity. Traditional European (and later, American) notions of archival neutrality and the objectivity of the archivist were developed at a time when the creation of documents was increasing at an alarming rate. The need for regulations and a standardized approach was apparent, and the theories that evolved in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries assisted the caretakers of archives in managing their workloads and establishing a professional approach to their work. This evolution of the profession was crucial, and the theories should not be dismissed. However, it is critical to place them in a particular time and recognize that they are inherently a product of the colonial mindset – a mindset that is recognized as not only outdated but also racist, discriminatory, and harmful. The very nature of government archives creates barriers to access by Indigenous people as they support settler governments in their various forms and are part of the settler state that continues to occupy Indigenous lands.<sup>16</sup>

In 2003, the BC Archives was amalgamated with the Royal BC Museum to form a Crown corporation. The policies and procedures of the two institutions were merged, ensuring that work with Indigenous communities is at the forefront of our operations. Being part of a larger cultural institution allows the BC Archives to draw on long-established relationships extant between the museum's First Nations department and Indigenous communities, and guarantees a deeper, more meaningful experience for community members who are able to view both tangible and intangible cultural heritage in one visit. However, this reality is relatively new in the history of the archives and, in its earlier existence, the BC Archives did not put as much consideration into community relationships as did the museum.

---

<sup>16</sup> Allison Mills, "Learning to Listen: Archival Sound Recordings and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property," *Archivaria* 83 (Spring 2017): 121.

The museum profession in North America has a lengthy history of collaboration with Indigenous communities, which, at the Royal BC Museum, dates back to the 1950s. In Canada, the degree to which museums engaged and collaborated with Indigenous communities varied throughout the mid- to late century. A critical transformation took place with the establishment of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples (final report published 1994), initiated as a response to the protests pertaining to *The Spirit Sings* exhibition at the Glenbow Museum.<sup>17</sup> Despite well-established collaborative museology practices, archives remained tied to the notion of neutrality and objectivity throughout the twentieth century, enduring for the most part as an isolated profession, insisting on maintaining the myth that the records can reveal truths without human interference.<sup>18</sup>

Though archives have attempted to maintain their sense of neutrality, the TRC calls to action do not mark the first time the archival community has been called to make changes regarding its relationship with Indigenous record keeping and communities. In his 1978 paper “The Right to Know,” Vine Deloria called for the implementation of specific services and practical solutions for Native American archives, cultural heritage, and traditional knowledge held in public repositories.<sup>19</sup> The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in the United States in 1990, and although it did not specifically address intangible cultural heritage, its existence led to discussions across the continent about the protection of Indigenous archival material.<sup>20</sup> In the Canadian museum context, the Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples established a framework for creating partnerships between cultural institutions and First Nations.<sup>21</sup> In 2006, the First Archivist Circle drafted the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*,

<sup>17</sup> For a more in-depth examination of collaboration in the museum world, and the establishment of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, see the following articles: Martha Black, “Collaborations: A Historical Perspective,” in *Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ki-ke-in, 785–827 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013); Caitlin Gordon-Walker, this publication; Julia Harrison, “Shaping Collaboration: Considering Institutional Culture,” *Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* 20, 3 (2005): 195–212; Anita Herle, “Museums and First Peoples in Canada,” *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 6 (1994): 39–66.

<sup>18</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration Including the Problems of War Archives and Archive Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer R. O’Neal, “‘The Right to Know’: Decolonizing Native American Archives,” *Journal of Western Archives* 6, 1 (2015): Article 2.

<sup>20</sup> “National NAGPRA,” National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, <https://www.nps.gov/nagpra/>.

<sup>21</sup> Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, “Turning the Page: Forging New Relationships between Museums and First Peoples,” Task Force Report on Museums

providing a framework for both non-Indigenous archival repositories and for Indigenous communities across the US and Canada to use.<sup>22</sup> The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, with further implications for archives holding Indigenous materials.<sup>23</sup> These examples demonstrate the depth of concern and conversation extant on the subject of Indigenous cultural heritage by the time the TRC released its calls to action. The TRC's calls to action are the latest in a series of increasingly accepted appeals for change.

For too long archives have continued to operate under the misguided and outdated model requiring archivists to remain silent and objective. The assumption that this is possible puts enormous pressure on archivists to do the impossible, but, even worse, it makes them complicit in perpetuating the silences in archival collections. In a post-TRC world, we cannot accept that the visible and mostly settler history apparent in the records is the only version of our story, or that it is inherently true simply based on its existence in the archives.

#### ADDRESSING CALLS TO INDIGENIZE THE ARCHIVES

Caswell and Cifor address the disconnect between the traditional role of the archivist and the needs of records' creators, subjects, users, and communities by suggesting that relationships need to be built between the former and the latter.<sup>24</sup> These relationships need to be centred on empathy, and the role of the archivist must shift from that of disinterested caretaker to that of caregiver. In order to heal the wounds created by or preserved in the archives, the archivist must be willing to engage with the people involved. This has long been common practice in museums where Indigenous communities have been invited behind the scenes to work and be with the collections in an intimate way. The archival profession often focuses so narrowly on records that we forget that every document, every recording, every photograph is connected in some way to a person or people. Caswell and Cifor describe four types of people with whom archivists interact, whether we intend to or not – the creators of archival records, the specific subjects of the records, the records' users,

---

and First Peoples, 3rd ed. (Ottawa: Canadian Museums Association and Assembly of First Nations, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> First Archivist Circle, *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (Flagstaff: University of Northern Arizona Libraries, 2007), <http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/>.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations, "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples," [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics."

and the broader communities that the records represent. They also discuss ways in which we can shift our relationships with each of these groups through the work we do. Using their model, I describe some of the ways in which the BC Archives is presently moving to a more human-centric model, and some of the ways in which we hope to do so in the future.

Over the past two years, community outreach has been identified as a priority of equal value alongside the more traditional archival functions of acquiring, preserving, describing, and making accessible records relating to the province, with the budget allocated accordingly. The examples outlined in this paper, while positive initial steps in our journey and extremely valuable in terms of improving and developing relationships, have largely been opportunistic and responsive to community requests and needs. We have begun work this year to research and create a model to establish future goals, whereby the human-centric model is used to transform other archival functions, such as descriptive practices (e.g., language, terminology, and incorporation of community-generated content and information). This model will form part of our Archives Strategy for the future, and input towards this strategy will be sought from communities, stakeholders, and internal bodies such as our First Nations Advocacy and Advisory Committee.

The first kind of relationship described by Caswell and Cifor is that between the archivist and the record creator. Despite the fact that the record creator may no longer be alive, as archivists undergo the work of appraisal, arrangement, and description, they become intimately knowledgeable of the creator, often particularly so in the case of private acquisitions (as opposed to government records). Archives generally recognize the wishes of private donors through legally binding donor agreements: for example, often agreeing to restrict records for a period of time to protect an individual's privacy. However, not all donors created the records they donate. In cases in which the creator's wishes are not explicit, we must try to determine as best as we can whether we are honouring them by making their records publicly accessible. Another problem stems from the fact that, as Caswell and Cifor note, the creator's wishes may not align with those of other interested parties, such as the record's subject, user, or community; however, rather than elevate one party above the others, archivists must approach the wishes of all with empathy and process the records with an awareness of power imbalances.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

In the BC Archives, a common example of the relationship between the archivist and the need to balance different stakeholder wishes is found in the records of anthropologists. Although generally not built into legally binding agreements, it is often easy to find evidence in correspondence and other records of promises made between the records' creators and their informants. For example, anthropologists gathering sensitive ceremonial information may make promises to publish or otherwise make available their findings for future use by the community. Ethnomusicologist Ida Halpern worked into her donor agreement a description of the trust that she built with the communities in which she worked, requiring the BC Archives to honour those relationships in perpetuity. From the Ida Halpern/Provincial Archives of BC donor agreement:

The Provincial Archives acknowledges that the acquisition by the Donor of important elements of the Collection was made possible by the acceptance by the Donor of a trust imposed upon the Donor by Native Indian groups and people concerned, that trust being to preserve and foster the cultural integrity of the use of the Collection.<sup>26</sup>

In this example the creator's wishes were written into the donor agreement, creating an obligation on the part of the archives to adhere to them. In many cases the creator's wishes can only be deduced by a thoughtful understanding of the material, developed through study of the records and the creator's work.

The archivist and the subject of a record form the second type of relationship. Indigenous individuals and communities are often the subject of archival records over which they had little or no say in the creation. Using traditional archival methodology, the subjects of records are not considered: the creator is recognized, and records are arranged and described according to the original order imposed by the government official holding the pen, the photographer capturing the image, and/or the ethnographer conducting the oral interview. The way in which we describe records puts an emphasis on the creator; the BC Archives follows the *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, a manual determining the language and structure we use to create our finding aids – the tools that connect records to their users.<sup>27</sup> Often *RAD* dismisses the subject entirely. If the record title imposed by the creator does not mention

<sup>26</sup> PR-0847 – Ida Halpern fonds, Royal BC Museum and Archives, file MS-2768A.40.3, Provincial Archives of British Columbia records.

<sup>27</sup> Canadian Committee on Archival Description, "Rules for Archival Description," <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/archdesrules.html>.

the record's subject, or does so poorly or in an inappropriate way, the advice given in the manual is to use the inappropriate title. The only redress available is to add information in the notes field – an optional descriptive element. It is far too easy to leave out the subject altogether. Entire communities can disappear from the archives – although they are there, without the tools to find them and make them visible, they may as well not exist at all. Alternatively, individuals and communities are labelled with culturally inappropriate descriptions; examples in the BC Archives include “Chilcotin Indian,” “Lillooet Indians Drying Berries,” “Tom Indian,” and “Squaw on Banks of Skeena River.”<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between the archivist and the subject of a record often intersects with that between archivists and record users and broader communities. Archivists across Canada are aware that language used in early or legacy descriptions is often not only disrespectful but also a cause of pain and suffering for Indigenous viewers.<sup>29</sup> Working with communities to learn the preferred language when re-describing records, and maintaining a current list of sanctioned terms for use in new descriptions, is essential. It is also important to recognize the silences in the archives. As Verne Harris illustrates, despite the assumption that archives mirror reality, the truth is that, at best, archives provide a glimpse into past events: once the process of recording is complete, and the record has gone through each person necessary in order to finally end up in the archives, what remains is a tiny sliver of evidence.<sup>30</sup> Archival silences, a prominent component of archival power, do not simply ignore Indigenous populations but, rather, actively participate in their marginalization.<sup>31</sup> Often the issue is not with glaring racist terminology but with what is missing. Recognizing the gaps and filling them is an important aspect of considering archivists' relationships with archival subjects. However, this work needs to be done with a great deal of sensitivity and consultation, keeping in mind that not all marginalized individuals and communities want to be seen. If the response from a subject is a wish to remain hidden, that, too, must be considered, and in such cases archivists must find a way to acknowledge the silences and attempt to understand and respect the choice of the person or group to retain it.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See <http://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/chilcotin-indian>; <http://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/lillooet-indians-drying-berries>; <http://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/tom-indian>; <http://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/indian-squaw-on-banks-of-skeena-river>.

<sup>29</sup> Bak et al. “Four Views on Archival Decolonization,” 11.

<sup>30</sup> Harris, “Archival Sliver,” 65.

<sup>31</sup> Ghaddar, “Spectre in the Archive,” 6.

<sup>32</sup> Carter, “Of Things Said and Unsaid,” 217.

In considering the relationship between the archivist and the user, Caswell and Cifor recognize the inherent problems with the traditional view of the user as a detached academic. Users span all human groups and experiences, and we need to shift the way we interact with them. An archivist's shift towards radical empathy here can be as simple as stocking tissues at the reference desk or as grand as the creation of descriptive systems, such as the Mukurtu system, a digital platform for sharing Indigenous cultural heritage that embeds traditional knowledge labels and other Indigenous information and allows differential access for users based on historical and social contexts.<sup>33</sup>

We can't make assumptions about who users are or about what their experience in the archives will be based on their stated reasons for being there. Many users of archives have experienced trauma in their lives, and that trauma may or may not be related to their visit. Even if the stated reason for a visit is to study genealogy, the staff must be prepared for the possibility that the user could potentially become upset by something she or he finds. A death certificate of a loved one could trigger the pain and suffering of a past time; similarly, the photograph of an ancestor may be painful to some.

The BC Archives is implementing, or planning to implement soon, both minor and major changes to the way we interact with our patrons. These changes include providing staff with training on how to engage with users who may have experienced trauma or who may have other histories that affect their behaviour in the reference room; providing forms for patrons to use anonymously to request descriptive changes in records, giving them a chance to engage with the record and instigate a positive change (at the moment this is done on an ad hoc basis, and users may not feel comfortable approaching archives staff to point out a mistake or omission in the description); implementing more appropriate, community-led descriptive practices, and ensuring that language used in descriptions is not racist or overtly triggering in other ways; shifting our language to focus on what we *can* do in the archives rather than on what we *can't* do – often our rules come across as institutional and restrictive, and can be extremely discouraging to some users; reviewing and updating the First Nations reference guide; creating a new reference guide to assist researchers searching for material related to residential schools; and providing copies of cultural material for free to self-identifying Indigenous researchers.

<sup>33</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 38.

The relationship between the archivist and the larger community is broad-reaching and is reflected throughout the work of the archives' staff: "Too often there are too many barriers between local communities and the academic and government repositories where records documenting community history reside."<sup>34</sup> It is time to stop attempting to assimilate Indigenous communities into a Eurocentric, settler way of knowing and, instead, to begin to indigenize the archives. There are many reasons members of Indigenous communities do not feel comfortable coming to archives, and these reasons are the backbone of colonialism itself. In addition to honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and incorporating these into our institution – not just in the areas that clearly connect us to Indigenous communities but in all areas – we must go to the communities. It is not the duty of Indigenous communities to reconcile with settlers; it is the responsibility of settlers to seek reconciliation with the Indigenous communities among which they live.

Community consultation is essential:<sup>35</sup> in order to change our practices in a way that is relevant to our audience, we must be willing to listen to and to learn from community members. Listening takes time. Consultation cannot happen in one meeting, one phone call, or a handful of e-mails. It must be ongoing, over many years, and based on sincere relationships.<sup>36</sup>

In order to demonstrate its commitment to true, meaningful consultation, the BC Archives has made efforts to send staff into Indigenous communities. The Ida Halpern Fonds includes recordings of Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Coast Salish singers. In order to discuss the recordings and the institution's intention to submit them for inscription on the UNESCO Memory of the World<sup>37</sup> register, I attempted to connect with each of the communities involved. With Lucy Bell, who is Haida and Head of First Nations and Repatriation at the Royal BC Museum, I travelled to Haida Gwaii to meet with Haida language teachers, community leaders, ceremonial dancers, and, most important, descendants of the Haida represented in the recordings. We discussed the importance of the recordings and the value they hold for the communities. In addition to gauging the communities' level of support for the UNESCO project – which was, on the whole, strong – we

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>35</sup> First Archivist Circle, *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*.

<sup>36</sup> Consultation has limitations. For more on this subject, see Robin Boast, "Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited," *Museum Anthropology* 34, 1 (2011): 56–70; and Julia Harrison, "Shaping Collaboration: Considering Institutional Culture," *Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* 20, 3 (2005): 195–212.

<sup>37</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow>.

began a discussion about the role the BC Archives plays as custodian of the cultural heritage recorded on the tapes. It is intended that this discussion will continue over years to come, via e-mail, telephone, and future visits. Similarly, in January 2018, staff from the BC Archives travelled to Kwakwaka'wakw and Nuu-chah-nulth communities on northern Vancouver Island and its vicinity.

Conferences and professional events also provide opportunities to engage in conversations with Indigenous communities.<sup>38</sup> Often impromptu but fruitful discussions, these meetings are intended to be the initiation of longer, more meaningful consultation; however extemporaneous, they are often significantly more successful than phone or e-mail introductions as they include a human element. Uprooting the archivist from the government institution, the embodiment of colonial power, makes her/him vulnerable and places her/him in a better position to listen and learn from those who know best how to handle their cultural information: "The act of reaching out to Indigenous communities first to let them know about the recordings in collections, rather than waiting for communities to come forward, is one way of beginning to recognise and break down this historical power imbalance."<sup>39</sup>

The BC Archives has undertaken other initiatives to increase our consultation with Indigenous communities. Partly what we want to gather from the consultation process is the understanding of traditional knowledge about records and the culture represented within them. We want to do this in order to update the language used in descriptive work, to include names of people and ceremonies, and to identify records that have use restrictions or rules binding them. For this, an exchange of knowledge must take place. The *Protocols for North American Archival Materials* recognizes that this task must be carried out in collaboration with communities. To date, this has often been done on an ad hoc basis when Indigenous researchers visit the reference room and identify records that include incorrect or inappropriate descriptions. At times the BC Archives has been able to engage in projects dedicated to having Indigenous contractors interpret and describe records. This occurred most notably in 2015, when three Kwakwaka'wakw speakers were hired to work with the Ida Halpern Fonds. The results are item-level descriptions

<sup>38</sup> I have recently attended the following three conferences: "(Un)Settling British Columbia," hosted by *BC Studies*, 4–6 May 2017; "First Nations, Land, and James Douglas: Indigenous and Treaty Rights in the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, 1849–1864," held at the Songhees Wellness Centre, 24–26 February 2017; and "Indigenous Perspectives on Repatriation," hosted by the Royal BC Museum, 29–31 March 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Allison Mills, "Learning to Listen," 122.

of ceremonial songs that include Kwakwaka'wakw language diacritics, interpretations, and details pertaining to cultural patrimony.<sup>40</sup> Ideally, the BC Archives will make this type of consultation part of any descriptive work of Indigenous cultural heritage. This will likely continue to be project based. At the very least, a more uniform approach to managing ad hoc requests for updates is essential.

An example of the type of structured descriptive knowledge initiative that the BC Archives has been researching is the Names and Knowledge Initiative at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives.<sup>41</sup> This initiative uses a multifaceted approach to gather a greater understanding of archival records. Hudson's Bay Company Archives staff regularly host naming events in remote communities, bringing photographs to Indigenous populations and providing a comfortable social atmosphere in which to talk, reminisce, and share information. The initiative simultaneously builds trust, creates and strengthens bonds between communities and the archives, and is successful in gathering useful information that aides in the descriptive work of the archives.<sup>42</sup>

Gathering knowledge about archival records is an important step, but adding it to an existing database that can seem inflexible in its structure may be a challenge. As the information we gather extends far beyond names to a deeper appreciation of the complexities of ownership, use, and protocols surrounding cultural heritage materials, we must come up with a way of respectfully conveying this knowledge. As traditional knowledge often does not fit the structures and rules of non-Indigenous ways of knowing and describing, the way in which we present it should stand out from the rest of the information contained in our databases. Some institutions include traditional knowledge (TK) labels, such as the ones employed by Mukurtu, an open-source cataloguing software designed with the needs of Indigenous communities in mind.<sup>43</sup> Mukurtu's TK labels are comprehensive but also flexible, and they provide an excellent example of the ways in which public information institutions can build layers of information into a single entry. TK labels allow "traditional" (i.e., Euro-Canadian) archival descriptions to exist alongside Indigenous knowledge. The labels enhance the entry. Although the BC Archives' databases do not presently have the capability to include TK labels,

<sup>40</sup> See <http://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/kla-sela-kasella>.

<sup>41</sup> Hudson's Bay Company Archives, "Names and Knowledge Initiative," [https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/names\\_knowledge/index.html](https://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/names_knowledge/index.html).

<sup>42</sup> Information gathered during a phone meeting with HBC Archives staff member James Gorton on 11 July 2017.

<sup>43</sup> "Mukurtu," <http://mukurtu.org/>.

Mukurtu provides a standard that the archives can aim to emulate going forward.

Besides engaging in community consultation, the BC Archives has worked to improve the relationship between the archivist and Indigenous communities by indigenizing its spaces and inviting communities into the reference room whenever possible. The BC Archives offers introductory workshops to assist Indigenous groups at the beginning stages of their research as well as specialized tours highlighting some of the records specific to participants' communities. Elders groups interested in genealogy and community heritage, and life skills classes offered annually by the band offices, are often repeat customers, coming back at regular intervals to update their skills and continue their research. Although the BC Archives is not yet advertising these opportunities in a systematic way, word of mouth has been effective in letting communities know that we are available to provide a catered service. Often these visits are made in conjunction with a larger visit to view related museum collections. The practice of welcoming Indigenous communities behind the scenes at the museum contributes to relationship building. Ensuring the museum collections managers and archivists are coordinating community visits leads to an expanded understanding of what records and cultural heritage encompass.

#### CUSTODIANSHIP VERSUS OWNERSHIP

Under current Canadian copyright laws, the Royal BC Museum and Archives are the legal owners of most of the material in their custody. The Canadian archival community has established a working group to address concerns about the weaknesses in the current Copyright Act regarding Indigenous knowledge, particularly traditional cultural expressions (TCEs). The working group has urged the federal government to engage in a respectful and transparent collaboration with Indigenous peoples in order to amend the Copyright Act in ways that recognize a community-based approach to copyright protection.<sup>44</sup> Until such time as community ownership of TCEs and other traditional knowledge is acknowledged in legislation, memory institutions bear the weight of legal responsibility, ownership, and, therefore, control. As a step towards indigenizing the archival institution, we must shift away from thinking of the repository as the *controller* of Indigenous records and towards

<sup>44</sup> Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) Statutory Review Working Group, "Copyright Issues and Positions," 11 April 2018, [http://www.archivescanada.ca/uploads/files/News/Copyright-StatReview\\_ConsultationDraftEN.pdf](http://www.archivescanada.ca/uploads/files/News/Copyright-StatReview_ConsultationDraftEN.pdf).

thinking of it as the *caregiver* of the records – once again taking on the notion of radical empathy and applying it to the way in which we care for records. In traditional archival language, the closest concept that explains this difference is that of custodianship: the records are in our custody, and we have a responsibility to protect them, but we are not the only people with rights to and responsibilities for them.<sup>45</sup> Archives must be willing to surrender some of their control to allow others to engage with records in a meaningful way. As carers of the records, rather than controllers, archivists must put the needs of the Indigenous informants – those who hold the intellectual rights to the information contained within the records – ahead of the outmoded conventions of the custodial institution.

In some cases, custodianship means physically reuniting Indigenous communities that were the creators or subjects with the records. Often colonial governments left a colony and took every record with them, leaving the Indigenous population with no way to mediate written history with oral testimony and create their own interpretations of their past.<sup>46</sup> Although to some degree this is true in British Columbia – some colonial records were removed to the UK, and a significant amount of post-Confederation information is stored in Ottawa – a greater concern for the BC Archives is the care of and access to records that are in our possession and are of more interest to Indigenous communities than we previously recognized. This may be due to their value for cultural and legal research or because, despite their being in the custody of the archives, intellectually they belong to Indigenous communities.

Those valued for their research use include records that, on the surface, do not seem to be Indigenous. Due to policies of assimilation, including the potlatch ban and other restrictions in the Indian Act, Indigenous people have been forced to operate within two juridical systems, creating records in their traditional way (created and passed down through oral traditions) as well as according to the settler-prescribed method of the written record. In order to be heard by the Canadian state, Indigenous communities had to create written documentation. Often this is hidden within collections of records, and its origins may not be immediately obvious.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Some theorists describe this as “cultural stewardship.” I use the terms “custodian,” “steward,” and “carer” interchangeably.

<sup>46</sup> Jeannette A. Bastian, “Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century,” *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 80.

<sup>47</sup> Shauna McRanor, “Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records and Their Material Manifestations: Implications for Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 74.

The responsibilities of a custodian go beyond recognizing the types of records to which Indigenous communities may want to have access; it also requires respecting Indigenous ways of knowing and record keeping. In the case of audio recordings, it is crucial to understand that oral ceremonies are an integral aspect of governance. According to the BC government's definition, many records that we classify as archival may actually be considered active; if they were to be scheduled according to a government information schedule, they would not have completed their active period and, therefore, would not be eligible for inclusion in the archives at all.<sup>48</sup> With this in mind, the responsible approach is to allow full access to these records for Indigenous communities in order to allow for the continued use and evolution of the record. Even better would be to create new records in the process: recording Indigenous community members interacting with, interpreting, and using the records creates an important new body of records. These new records can be compared to transcripts of radio shows or similar recordings. Encouraging community interactions with material has been common practice in the museum for decades; an example is the Royal BC Museum Ethnology photograph collection, in which the photographs are mounted on a card that, over time, has become covered in notes written by community members. This not only provides a chance for the community members to write the narrative of their own material but also creates a more dynamic and interactive experience for the users. Allowing full access to the records requires the archivist to trust the user completely, but there is no reason not to: Indigenous users will not allow untrustworthy accounts to be incorporated into the records that they need for their governance or cultural revitalization efforts.<sup>49</sup> The original records don't change but are expanded upon; in museum practice this exercise of allowing the collections to evolve and take on new layers with each interaction is sometimes referred to as "wrapping."<sup>50</sup> As this has been common practice at the Royal BC Museum for some time, it is natural that the archives will seek to emulate the process. In 2015, when the BC Archives hired three Kwakwaka'wakw speakers to assist with language and cultural interpretation of the Ida Halpern Fonds.<sup>51</sup> The work that

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>50</sup> Aldona Jonaitis, "Franz Boas, John Swanton, and the New Haida Sculpture at the American Museum of Natural History," in *The Early Years of Native American Art History: Essays on the Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, ed. Janet Catherine Berlo (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 53.

<sup>51</sup> PR-0847 – Ida Halpern Fonds, Royal BC Museum and Archives, <http://search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/ida-halpern-fonds>.

these contract employees did was recorded for posterity. To date, the recordings of the interpretation sessions are only accessible internally for staff research purposes, but the intention is to make them available more widely in future – if not publicly, then at least to community members when they request access to the related archival recordings. Creating and maintaining these new records is essential to maintaining the authenticity of the oral records: in the case of written records, authenticity is determined by examining the structure and body of the document, but the authenticity of oral records must be done orally and by keeping it alive through active use.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, many archivists advocate for cultural stewardship, whereby new material is acquired with an understanding, from the start, that the Indigenous intellectual rights holders will be granted much greater access to their material in exchange for the preservation and care that the institution can provide.<sup>53</sup> Canadian copyright laws pose a barrier to this approach to custodianship. Archivists are anxious to adhere to Canadian laws, but these laws are frequently at odds with traditional Indigenous intellectual property rules, which often recognize multiple or family-based ownership. Managing traditional use protocols can be daunting and time-consuming, but it is essential for reconciliation.<sup>54</sup>

The archival profession is continually evolving, and the BC Archives is no exception. In a post-TRC world it is essential that we recognize the human nature of archives in order to remain relevant. Even in a government institution with deep colonial roots, it is not only possible but also crucial that we provide access in a way that is thoughtful, respectful, and acknowledges Indigenous ways of knowing. By shifting our thinking away from the traditional notions of control over the documentary heritage to care of cultural heritage, archivists open the doors to meaningful engagement and deeper relationships with Indigenous users and communities. Recognizing that the BC Archives remains a colonial institution that wields considerable power, by implementing small but profound changes it can begin to indigenize its spaces and practices, creating an enriched experience for all.

---

<sup>52</sup> McRanor, “Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records,” 79.

<sup>53</sup> Bak et al., “Four Views on Archival Decolonization,” 14.

<sup>54</sup> Mills, “Learning to Listen,” 123.