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## **When Reconciliation Meets Conflict: Exploring Indigenous Archives**

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### **Abstract**

This article proposes a framework of Indigenous archives that encompasses repositories housed in Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous repositories that care for records by and about Indigenous peoples. The author contends that a discourse of Indigenous archives can help archivists reform their theories and methodologies in ways that support Indigenous sovereignty and ways of knowing. The author makes the case for a discourse of Indigenous archives by using two case studies and reviewing key policy documents such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

*Is it too much to imagine that archivists might also shift their views on privacy, open access, and what constitutes the public good in light of the changing contours of indigenous politics? (Christen, 2011, p. 207-08).*

### **What Are Indigenous Archives?**

What does the term Indigenous archives encompass? Does it exclusively refer to archival repositories housed within Indigenous communities or can it also refer to archival repositories outside of these communities which care for records about Indigenous peoples? In settler societies like the United States and Canada, many authors have described (Lawson, 2004; O’Neal, 2015) how records *by* and *about* Indigenous peoples have been dispersed throughout non-Indigenous libraries, archives, and museums by way of historical processes. I therefore argue for the usefulness of Indigenous archives as a discursive framework by which to theorize about this area of archival practice. However, I must first acknowledge my positionality as a third-generation settler in Canada of Jewish heritage. Although I am not Indigenous, I argue that non-Indigenous Canadians have a moral duty to learn about colonialism and its ongoing legacies. Following Jennifer O’Neal’s (2015) example, I contend that archivists and allied professionals—librarians, curators, conservators, etc.—of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage must work together to reform their existing theories, methodologies, and practices in ways that support the

sovereignty and traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities. I therefore write this piece to add my voice to a growing dialogue that seeks to decolonize archival thinking and practice.

I will begin the article by situating our discussion of Indigenous archives in the broader landscape of a few seminal international and national policy documents and protocols: the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (the *Declaration*), the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (the *Protocols*), and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *94 Calls to Action*. With this contextual grounding, I will use two case studies to illustrate the values, aspirations, and challenges that are common to Indigenous archives. The case studies discussed involve projects in Canada and Australia; I will use the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Indigenous archives' over related terms, such as 'Aboriginal' and 'First Nations', because 'Indigenous' is the term that is most global in scope "... [and refers] broadly to peoples of long settlement and connection to specific lands who have been adversely affected by incursions by industrial economies, displacement, and settlement of their traditional territories by others" (First Nations Studies Program, 2009).

### **Policies and Protocols**

The *Declaration* and the *Protocols* provide a theoretical and moral foundation for a conceptualization of Indigenous archives. The *Declaration* draws on the rights-based framework of international law, affirming the sovereignty and human rights of Indigenous peoples. Article 31 makes an explicit link between Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous cultures by affirming the right of Indigenous peoples "to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions" (United Nations, 2008, p. 11). The *Protocols* also employ a rights-based framework, but the intended audience is exclusively non-Indigenous cultural heritage professionals. In particular, the *Protocols* were designed to provide archivists and librarians with guidelines for the "culturally responsive" stewardship of Indigenous archival materials held in the custody of non-Indigenous repositories. The *Protocols* define "culturally responsive" stewardship as "... [tailored] actions which demonstrate awareness and appreciation of the needs of a particular group, community, or nation" (First Archivists Circle, 2007, p. 21). While the *Declaration* and the *Protocols* are by no means the only documents of their kind, these two documents helped build a theoretical and methodological framework where cultural heritage professionals can engage with the challenges of Indigenous archives.

In Canada, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has stimulated dialogue and action among the archival community. Published alongside its *Final Report* in 2015, the TRC's *94 Calls to Action* include four recommendations specifically directed to heritage institutions and two recommendations specifically directed to the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). Like many of the other calls to action, the 70<sup>th</sup> call to action invokes the *Declaration*, admonishing the federal government to provide funding to the Association of Canadian Archivists so that it can review its compliance with the *Declaration* and develop recommendations for full implementation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 8). In response to the *Calls to Action*, the Steering Committee on Canada's Archives has established a 12-person Truth and Reconciliation Report Task Force (TRC-TF), whose mandate is "to conduct a review of archival policies and best practices existent across the country and

identify potential barriers to reconciliation efforts between the Canadian archival community and Indigenous record keepers” (McCracken, 2016). Along with efforts from archival institutions and provincial archival associations, the TRC-TF is helping chart a new course for Indigenous archives and Canadian archives more broadly.

### **The Trust and Technology Project**

At Monash University in Australia, archival scholars worked with the Koorie Indigenous peoples of Southeast Australia on a multi-year project from 2003 to 2008 called Trust and Technology: Building Archival Systems for Indigenous Oral Memory. The research team conducted extensive interviews with Koorie communities, uncovering profound distrust of non-Indigenous archives and a strong desire to exercise control over the curation and management of Koorie records in archival custody. Out of these conversations emerged a vision of *reconciled research*, whereby the researchers conceived of “a collaborative, co-creative journey...between members of the academy, Indigenous communities and the archival community” (McKemmish, Faulkhead, & Russell, 2011, p. 220).

The research team developed a Statement of Principles on Australian Indigenous Knowledge and the Archives, which encompasses a wide range of concerns, including: the recognition that Indigenous knowledge can come from textual *and* oral sources and the recognition that Indigenous peoples must have ways of annotating records about them held by non-Indigenous archives. For instance, Principle 1 advocates for an expansive understanding of Indigenous records that recognizes the centrality of “oral memory and storytelling” in Indigenous recordkeeping practices (McKemmish, Faulkhead, & Russell, 2011, p. 230). Moreover, Principle 5 affirms the right of Indigenous people to “challenge ‘official’ records” by such measures as commenting on inaccuracies and adding family and individual narratives alongside existing archival descriptions” (McKemmish, Faulkhead, & Russell, 2011, p. 231).

The research team also affirmed the importance of Indigenous epistemologies and values by developing the Koorie Archiving System. After developing specifications for a Koorie Annotation System—a networked system whereby user annotations can be linked to records in archival custody—in the first phase of the project, the research team secured funding from the State Government of Victoria to develop a Koorie Archiving System based on the specifications (McKemmish, Faulkhead, & Russell, 2011). The result was a collaborative archival system developed among members from the Public Record Office of Victoria, the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc., the National Archives of Australia, and various Koorie communities. The Koorie Archiving System is designed to provide a range of affordances for Indigenous users, including the integration of Koorie records from government, community, and personal sources; the inclusion of various forms of media, including oral testimony; the potential for controls and protocols to be established that respect the ownership rights of Koorie individuals, families, and communities over archival materials; and the capability for users to add new content to the system (McKemmish, Faulkhead, & Russell, 2011).

### **The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation**

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) in Winnipeg, Manitoba operates within the ethically fraught arena of the Indian Residential School (IRS) system and its ongoing legacy. In 2006, Schedule N of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) mandated the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the NCTR, which would house the records generated by the TRC's activities as well as digital surrogates of millions of records related to residential schools that the TRC collected from archival institutions around the country (Lougheed, Moran, & Callison, 2015). On June 21, 2013, the University of Manitoba and its partners were officially named the host of the NCTR, and the centre officially opened in November 2015 (Lougheed, Moran, & Callison, 2015).

The NCTR faces significant challenges in implementing key aspects of its mission, with the most notable concern relating to the goal of Indigenous participation and collaboration (Lougheed, Moran, & Callison, 2015). The NCTR staff must work toward "metadata normalization," whereby the seven metadata schemas that the Centre has inherited must be integrated so that users can access the records in the database in a standardized way (Lougheed, Moran, & Callison, 2015, p. 601). Meanwhile, the NCTR staff has prioritized the ingestion of over four million digital surrogates over a period of three years before it moves on to the process of metadata normalization (Lougheed, Moran, & Callison, 2015). Furthermore, while the NCTR aspires to a collaborative relationship with Indigenous communities, it must mediate the distrust that many Indigenous communities associate with institutional archives.

Certain archival scholars have argued that it would actually be productive for the NCTR to acknowledge and incorporate distrust and conflict into its practices. Lisa Nathan, Elizabeth Shaffer, and Maggie Castor (2015) question the assertion of a post-colonial Canadian society, arguing that "[repression] and conflict continue, just in different forms" (p. 112). Nathan et al. (2015) posit a framework of "generative friction," whereby acknowledging conflict and distrust can help the NCTR work toward its mission of reconciliation (pp.113-15).

Similarly, J.J. Ghaddar (2016) engages with similar issues by analyzing the ongoing legal conflict over the fate of the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) records, which were produced in confidential hearings during which residential school survivors testified to an independent adjudicator about their experiences of physical and sexual abuse during their time at residential schools.<sup>1</sup> Ghaddar (2016) describes the various competing views about the retention of the IAP records, ranging from full preservation to full destruction. Furthermore, she argues that the case of the IAP records illustrates the way in which histories of colonization haunt the Canadian archival imagination. But, Ghaddar argues that the idea of haunting can actually be helpful in negotiating key questions related to the IAP records and the NCTR: "[haunting] conceptually allows us to consider the fact that complicated, difficult, and contrary claims will invariably arise when colonial histories are evoked in relation to the archive" (Ghaddar, 2016, p. 24).

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<sup>1</sup> As it stands the IAP case is ongoing, with the Supreme Court of Canada recently agreeing to review previous decisions by the Ontario Supreme Court and Ontario Court of Appeal. For more information see Karen Busby, "SCC to rule on preservation of residential school survivors' files," *Canadian Lawyer*, accessed November 17, 2016, <http://canadianlawyermag.com/6219/SCC-to-rule-on-preservation-of-residential-schools-survivors-files.html>

## Conclusion

In the introduction, I posited that the term Indigenous archives can encompass records managed by and for Indigenous communities *and* records about Indigenous peoples that are managed by non-Indigenous archival repositories. I also posited that the term Indigenous archives can provide archivists with a discursive framework by which to decolonize archival theories, methodologies, and practices. Seminal policy documents and protocols such as the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* have provided archivists and allied professionals with the methodological tools to engage in this decolonizing work. Furthermore, largescale research initiatives—like the Trust and Technology project and the establishment of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation— demonstrate the ways archivists are working to reshape the relationship between archival institutions and Indigenous communities. This work of reconciliation is not an option but rather a requirement in a settler society such as Canada. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians are enmeshed in the ongoing histories of colonialism, and as cultural heritage professionals, we have a moral duty to reform our principles and practices by privileging Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous rights.

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