Writing With Sensitivity:

The Importance of Standardizing Descriptions of Archival Material from Indigenous Communities

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Abstract:

As custodians of records, archivists have the power to produce descriptions that respect the culture and knowledge of Indigenous populations. The current descriptive standards do not contain guidance for describing archival material from Indigenous communities, which is a critical absence that requires further discussion. It is important to generate specialized considerations regarding the representation of these archival documents because language is a powerful tool that can disrupt or perpetuate colonial legacies. Several recommendations can be offered, such as collaborating with members of Indigenous communities to acknowledge their expertise over their cultural heritage. By generating an accessible standard, archivists can employ proactive strategies at the outset of the description process. Ultimately, archival spaces must be willing to adjust traditional archival practices to sensitively perform their duty to the record subjects, creators, and researchers.

Keywords:

Archival description, Agency, Indigenous ways of knowing (IWK)

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The process of archival description is an important act of intellectual control that explains the context, content and arrangement of archival holdings to enhance their accessibility. There are several descriptive standards that outline best practices for performing archival description, such as the General International Standard Archival Description and the Rules for Archival Description (RAD). These standards do not contain guidance for describing archival material from Indigenous communities, which is a critical absence that requires further discussion. Recently implemented archival strategies from various groups, including libraries and education centres, will be used to broadly theorize the contents of a proposed section within RAD devoted to describing Indigenous peoples' archival material. It is important to assess representation within these archival documents because language is a powerful tool that can disrupt colonial legacies. Further research on this complex subject matter should be conducted to draft descriptive considerations that respect the unique cultural philosophies of various Indigenous Nations. Ultimately, as custodians of important materials from Indigenous communities, archivists must be willing to adjust traditional archival practices to sensitively perform their duty to the record subjects, creators, and researchers.

Examples of meaningful strategic initiatives

Several institutions have established strategies for processing Indigenous peoples' archival material through projects and partnerships with Indigenous communities. These strategies, discussed below, encompass recommendations that provide a framework for developing a professional standard that promotes inclusive archival descriptions.

Mellon Audio Project II from the American Philosophical Society Library

The American Philosophical Society (APS) Library in Philadelphia preserves an extensive collection of archival material from Indigenous communities in the United States (Carpenter, 2019). The APS Library led the Mellon Audio Project II from 2011 to 2014 alongside members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the Penobscot Nation, the Tuscarora Nation, and various Anishinaabe communities (Carpenter, 2019). These groups determined that several materials deemed to be “culturally sensitive” at the APS Library, written in Cherokee syllabary, were unjust-

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tifiably restricted (Carpenter, 2019). The community partners also corrected inaccurate metadata regarding the material and provided additional context from a contemporary Indigenous perspective. Carpenter (2019) concluded that the "...inclusion of this expertise in the improvement of archival description [was] not just a matter of respect but also of practical benefit to archival institutions seeking to represent their collections more accurately, appropriately, and meaningfully" (p. 2). Many of these materials were initially described using English notes written by non-Indigenous anthropologists, which ultimately led to inaccurate representations (Carpenter, 2019). The project demonstrates the importance of partnering with Indigenous communities to comment upon their cultural histories, especially with the presence of language barriers. As a result of Indigenous–archivist collaboration, the APS Library is able to position itself to produce informed descriptions that respect the sacrality of archived items. Ultimately, relinquishing control to more knowledgeable parties is essential to approaching the description of materials from Indigenous communities.

The Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre and National Residential Schools Survivors' Society

The 2005 project "Remember the Children" by the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre and National Residential Schools Survivors' Society offers an additional approach for involving Indigenous communities in the process of archival description (McCracken, 2015). The project aimed to "...connect survivors with photographs of themselves and to gather information about the individuals portrayed in the photographs" (McCracken, 2015, p. 186). Photo albums were sent to various Indigenous communities for identification, and archival holdings were updated with the new data (McCracken, 2015). McCracken (2015) writes that including the perspectives of survivors "...in description, arrangement, and outreach practices has allowed for archives to develop that truly illustrates the survivor experience in the legacy of residential schools" (p. 190). In these circumstances, the project emphasizes that it is possible for repositories to recover missing context regarding their material through outreach with Indigenous communities. Archivists cannot accurately describe their holdings without proper context. Yet, this project goes beyond consideration

for the archival creator—in this instance, the Residential School Administrators—and instead, reaches out to the subjects in the records. Iacovino (2010) contributed to the Australian Research Council Project “Trust and Technology: Building Archival Systems for Indigenous Oral Memory,” which advocated for “...Indigenous ‘co-creatorship’ or parallel provenance as an archival principle” (p. 354). Iacovino (2010) stated that recognizing Indigenous peoples as “...participants rather than as mere records subjects [allows them to] engage in the creation, capture, systemisation, preservation and access to records over time and space” (p. 362). These projects empower Indigenous peoples to contribute to and oversee their representation within archival institutions. As prominent subjects in the records, the knowledge, experience, and voices of Indigenous populations should be prioritized in the production of comprehensive descriptions.

The Reciprocal Research Network and Mukurtu

Lougheed et al. (2015) write about two online tools that permit Indigenous communities to provide their cultural knowledge concerning museum artifacts: Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) and Mukurtu. While these tools are employed in a museum context, these platforms could be reconfigured into an archival setting to allow archivists to easily gather and integrate the perspectives of Indigenous participants into their archival processes. RRN facilitates “...reciprocal and collaborative research about cultural heritage” through participatory features that permit Indigenous communities, cultural institutions, and researchers to begin new projects, share ideas, and build professional relationships (Lougheed et al., 2015, p. 608). Mukurtu is described as an “...open-source content management software that is designed specifically for preserving cultural knowledge” by allowing members of Indigenous communities to directly manage their digital heritage (Lougheed et al., 2015, p. 612). The Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal utilizes Mukurtu to allow “...tribes, scholars, and originating institutions to upload content, create collections, add metadata/tags/comments...and add audio/video/textual narratives to the existing content” (Lougheed et al., 2015, p. 608). In an archival context, these online tools permit real-time communication to allow Indigenous individuals to be consulted early in the description process. Their guidance regarding cultural sensitivities and their personal histories allows archival repositories to produce respectful descriptions and receive feedback for further improvement. These collaborative models redistrib-

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ute the authority over Indigenous materials to the communities, which permits Indigenous groups to control their representation in archival institutions.

Preliminary framework for a proposed RAD chapter

Including an additional chapter for RAD that contains guidance for replacing offensive language and promoting Indigenous knowledge systems would help archivists implement specialized considerations into their descriptive processes for Indigenous peoples' materials. This discussion is not intended to create a finalized list of guidelines, but instead offer recommendations based upon an analysis of projects and professional organizations that have incorporated Indigenous voices into their archival practices. Currently, RAD contains chapters regarding the treatment of textual records, sound recordings, objects, and other documents. It is inappropriate to follow the guidelines regarding "objects" to describe a ceremonial headdress. Likewise, an oral history record is more than a "sound recording." Thus, a separate chapter in RAD would avoid these disrespectful classifications and offer more specific guidance for approaching these materials.

Approaching the treatment of offensive terminology

The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials arose from a meeting held at Northern Arizona University Cline Library (First Archivist Circle, 2006). The Protocols are meant to outline best practices for preserving and maintaining access to items from Indigenous peoples held in non-Indigenous organizations (First Archivist Circle, 2006). The Protocols have several recommendations for approaching records that contain racist views and derogatory terminology. They state that archives could include a brief notice "...to descriptive tools or items, [e.g.,] The (Tribal name) finds information in this work inaccurate or disrespectful. To learn more contact ..." (First Archivists Circle, 2006, p. 13). This disclaimer prepares patrons for the offensive terminology without removing the formal title proper. In addition, the Protocols state that the formal title proper can be maintained with a brief explanation for the language, such as "title created by xxxx in xxxx" (First Archivists Circle, 2006, p. 13). Alternatively, the Protocols suggest that archivists

can “...provide substitute language (e.g., replace ‘squaw’ or ‘buck’ with [woman] or [man])” (First Archivists Circle, 2006, p. 13). An archival institution may determine that certain terms are too offensive to include in the description, regardless of whether it appears in the original record. Ultimately, these warning systems allow repositories to perform archival description with awareness and sensitivity.

Culturally sensitive materials and the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems

The Protocols for the Treatment of Indigenous Materials were created by the APS to help their staff process the collections, but the guidelines could be applied to other institutions. The APS Protocols define culturally sensitive material as “any Indigenous material that depicts a tribal, spiritual or religious place, object, belief or activity. A spiritual activity may include prayers, ceremonies, burials, songs, dancing, healings, and medicine rituals” (Carpenter, 2019, p. 415). Including this definition into the proposed RAD chapter or the RAD index could help archivists determine if their holdings contain culturally sensitive material. It is important to consider that many archivists may not possess extensive knowledge of Indigenous history, and accordingly, should have access to multiple tools for guidance. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Thesaurus is intended to “...assist in unlocking the knowledge held in libraries, archives and other information services” (Garwood & Moorcroft, 1997, p. v). Although it was designed for Indigenous Australian communities, the book provides useful alternatives for common terms, such as replacing “Ancestor spirits” with “Ancestral beings” (Garwood & Moorcroft, 1997). This book would allow archivists to use more appropriate terminology in their descriptions and could be referenced in the RAD chapter as a resource for additional assistance. Furthermore, including a statement about the importance of gaining specialized knowledge directly from Indigenous communities, especially regarding cultural artifacts, could motivate the creation of outreach policies from the repository. Loughheed et al. (2015) state that the National Research Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NRCTR) has established five practices for incorporating Indigenous knowledge into their daily processes. One practice encourages collaboration with Indigenous communities to include traditional names and spellings of locations and tribal groups (Loughheed et al., 2015). This language awareness is intended to “provide a welcoming environment and assistance for First

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Nations, Métis, non-status, and Inuit people to access this knowledge” (Lougheed et al., 2015, p. 606). The NRCTR’s recommendation facilitates improved access to archival collections for Indigenous researchers. Cara Krmpotich’s speech at the Indigenous Collections Symposium in March 2017 provides another suggestion for incorporating Indigenous knowledge into museum or archival environments. She highlights that databases commonly employ the Roman or Christian calendar and recommends including an additional field “...for ‘seasonal’ time, or ‘cyclical’ or ‘ceremonial’ time” (“Indigenous Collections Symposium,” 2017, p. 44). Rule 1.4B2 of RAD states that if the date found on the unit being described does not follow the Gregorian or Julian calendar, the date should be written in its original format, followed by its equivalent date in the Gregorian or Julian calendar, with a note specifying the calendar being used (“Rules for Archival Description,” 2008). It is possible that there may not be an equivalent date in the Gregorian calendar for seasonal time. Thus, the proposed RAD chapter should outline alternative perspectives regarding time to ensure that the Indigenous archival document or artifact is accurately described. Krmpotich highlights that “...by augmenting how we document time...we include information about the daily rhythms of peoples’ lives...[and] de-naturalize the Christian calendar as the singular way in which objects are conceived” (“Indigenous Collections Symposium,” 2017, p. 46). Thus, implementing Indigenous knowledge would enhance these archival descriptions. Archival repositories would benefit from the provision of standardized measures and archivists could make adjustments, based on their needs.

An archivist’s responsibility and the significance of archival descriptions

As custodians of Indigenous peoples’ records, archivists have the power to produce descriptions that respect the culture and knowledge of Indigenous populations. Conversely, archival descriptions can continue the cycle of violence that has historically impacted Indigenous communities. Caswell (2014) asserts that symbolic annihilation occurs when marginalized groups “...are absent, grossly under-represented, maligned, or trivialized” within prominent media and popular culture (p. 27). Arguably, archival descriptions can contribute to this annihilation through misrepresentation. By casually replicating racist terminology in records without context or warnings,

Wright (2019) states that these terms become legitimized over time “...forc[ing] users to engage with terms and ideas which are offensive, insulting, and potentially traumatic” (p. 341). Therefore, it is evident that archival processes are not passive tasks but “critical interventions” that require sensitivity (Wright, 2019). While archivists should not alter archival records to remove offensive content, the user’s interaction with the records is notably guided by the contextualization provided by the archive. There is a responsibility to ensure that any problematic power structures within the documents are not reinforced through an archivist’s description. As an example, the legacy of colonialism can be disrupted by producing descriptions that respect Indigenous communities’ location names over colonial titles. The implementation of Indigenous ways of knowing asserts their presence and survivance within the archive and into the broader community. Wright (2019) highlights that over time “...names and titles become fixed; they are seen as an integral part to the record’s meaning and order” (p. 334). With this in mind, archival descriptions of Indigenous materials should respectfully employ Indigenous knowledge. Caswell and Cifor (2016) intend to reorient the role of archivists towards “...the approach of a feminist ethics of care, [in which] archivists are seen as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility” (p. 24). This ideology places immense accountability upon archivists to implement strategies that recognize the authority of Indigenous populations, regardless of their status as creators or subjects in the records. Whether that includes partnerships with local Indigenous communities or hiring more Indigenous professionals, Caswell and Cifor (2016) state that “radical empathy” is important for considering “...the consequences of [one’s] decisions on the larger community” (p. 39). Improper representations of Indigenous peoples’ cultural materials can perpetuate stereotypes or alienate Indigenous researchers from visiting archival repositories. Thus, the power of archival descriptions should be regulated by generating an acceptable standard that employs a strong sense of sensitivity and respect for these artifacts.

In conclusion, the first step towards meaningful change is recognizing that archival procedures can be improved. Collaborating with Indigenous communities is also an important strategy for producing comprehensive descriptions and acknowledging their expertise in their cultural heritage. Archivists must be willing to adapt their methodologies to adequately serve their broader

community. Otherwise, there is the risk of causing further harm to Indigenous populations, as a lack of consideration for Indigenous peoples' autonomy over the portrayal of their materials communicates that archives are reserved for specific groups of people. By performing traditional archival processes with sensitivity, archivists can establish an inclusive environment for record subjects, creators, and researchers. These specialized considerations should be compiled into an accessible standard, such as RAD, to allow archivists to employ proactive strategies at the outset of the description process and write with sensitivity.

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