

Rethinking Archival Practices: Decolonization, Ethics, and Community Engagement

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INFO 560: Archives I

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March 16, 2025

Abstract

Decolonization in archives is an emerging movement that aims to change how we manage archival materials. It seeks to address and fix the colonial legacies, biases, and inequalities that exist in traditional archival systems. This literature review highlights important scholarly views on how to decolonize archives. It focuses on key themes like ethical appraisal and selection, representation and description, equitable access, and community collaboration. By using critical archival theory, feminist standpoint theory, and postcolonial theory, this review points out how archivists influence historical narratives and the importance of inclusive representation.

The review evaluates contributions from scholars such as Caswell (2016, 2021), Jimerson (2007), Ghaddar (2016), and Harris (2002), who critique archival power structures and advocate for ethical, community-centered archival methodologies. Case studies such as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Australian Indigenous Community Archives Initiative demonstrate practical applications of decolonizing archival practices. These examples highlight both the successes and challenges involved in transferring archival control to marginalized communities and in implementing collaborative, community-driven archival frameworks.

Current research provides useful theories, but it lacks practical advice for using decolonizing strategies in institutions. Most of the literature focuses on Western archival traditions and rarely compares them to decolonization efforts in postcolonial regions worldwide. Future studies should fill these gaps by offering detailed case studies, looking at how digital archives relate to decolonization, and creating specific methods to tackle unfair practices in archiving.

This review highlights the importance of archivists actively using decolonizing methods, addressing historical biases, and practicing ethical and participatory approaches that focus on

marginalized voices. By incorporating these ideas into their work, archivists can help create more open, inclusive, and fair archival environments.

Introduction

Decolonization in archives means rethinking how we handle and organize records to challenge the colonial legacies, biases, and inequalities that exist in traditional archival systems (Ghaddar, 2016; Harris, 2002). This involves looking closely at whose histories are saved, how they are shown, and what responsibilities archives have toward marginalized and underrepresented communities (Caswell, 2016; Jimerson, 2007). Archives have often acted as tools of power, shaping how history is told and supporting dominant views. Therefore, we must address these systemic inequalities and adopt practices that focus on inclusivity, ethical management, and engaging with communities.

This literature review examines how to decolonize archival practices. It looks at the main arguments, methods, and limitations in this area. The articles and book chapters discussed cover important topics such as ethical evaluation and selection, representation and description, fair access, and working effectively with communities (Douglas, 2016; Greene & Meissner, 2005; Monks-Leeson, 2011; Samuels, 1986). This review highlights key discussions, points out gaps, and suggests areas for future research and practice in decolonizing archival methods.

Historical and Conceptual Background

The origins of archival theory and practice are closely linked to colonial administrative systems. Early archival practices, particularly in European contexts, were developed primarily to serve colonial bureaucratic and administrative functions, reinforcing power dynamics and establishing records as tools for control, governance, and legitimization of colonial authority

(Harris, 2002; Tschan, 2002). This foundational period established many of the biases and power imbalances still inherent within contemporary archival systems, influencing whose records were preserved and how they were represented (Jimerson, 2007; Harris, 2002).

Modern archival theory has increasingly engaged with critical theoretical frameworks to address these historical biases. Critical archival theory, feminist standpoint theory, and postcolonial theory are among the leading frameworks shaping contemporary archival discussion. Critical archival theory examines the archivist's role as an active participant in shaping historical narratives rather than a passive caretaker of neutral records (Douglas, 2016; Greene & Meissner, 2005). The feminist standpoint theory explains that personal experiences matter in how we assess and represent archives. It promotes including and fairly representing marginalized groups (Caswell, 2016). Postcolonial theory looks at how colonial history affects archival systems. It aims to remove biases and help communities that have been historically marginalized through inclusive and cooperative archival practices (Ghaddar, 2016).

Analysis of Scholarly Literature

Ethical Frameworks in Decolonizing Archival Practices

Caswell (2016) examines archival theory from a culturally inclusive and non-colonial perspective. She argues that traditional archival practices have often excluded certain groups, especially in how records are evaluated, described, and accessed. A key strength of Caswell's work is her critique of the idea that archives can be neutral, highlighting the power dynamics within archival institutions. By questioning established practices, Caswell supports the development of more inclusive and socially responsible methods in archiving. However, her work lacks detailed examples or case studies that show how to apply these principles in real archival situations.

Jimerson (2007) looks at the responsibilities of archivists through the lens of social justice. He believes that archival ethics should guide efforts toward social justice and encourages archivists to actively work against inequalities in their field. Jimerson questions the idea of neutrality, saying that claims of being impartial often support existing power structures instead of challenging them. A strong point of Jimerson's work is his clear explanation of archivists' ethical responsibilities and their role in shaping historical narratives. However, like Caswell (2016), he could provide more practical advice on how archivists can deal with ethical challenges in their work.

Indigenous Representation and Reconciliation

Ghaddar (2016) examines how archives can play a role in national reconciliation, focusing on Indigenous memories held in archives. He points out that archives have often served colonial interests but can also support reconciliation by giving access to Indigenous records and histories. A strong part of Ghaddar's analysis is his detailed critique of how archives have participated in reconciliation efforts. However, his view may simplify the outcomes of reconciliation, missing the complex challenges of turning ideas into real actions.

Thorpe (2019) focuses on Indigenous self-determination in archives through "transformative praxis." This approach involves working directly with Indigenous communities in archival processes, moving from institutional control to real collaboration. Thorpe effectively shows the importance of building strong relationships. However, her work does not fully address the tension between ideal relationship-building and the established practices that often block meaningful change.

Power Dynamics and Archival Authority

Harris (2002) examines how colonial legacies influence power structures in archives. He stresses the need to address and break down these ongoing power imbalances. His critique is relevant not just in South Africa but worldwide, highlighting the importance of addressing colonial issues in archival practice. However, Harris's work does not focus much on digital archives, which are increasingly important today.

Gilliland (2011) questions the idea of neutrality in archival education. She argues that claims of neutrality can hide power structures that support colonial legacies. She challenges archivists and educators to think about their ethical responsibilities. While she raises important points, Gilliland's work would benefit from more practical strategies for educators and archivists to avoid reinforcing colonial ideas in their teaching.

Feminist and Empathetic Approaches to Archival Practice

Caswell (2021) suggests incorporating feminist standpoint appraisal into liberatory archival practice. Her analysis emphasizes the strengths of feminist methodologies in fostering inclusive representation and effectively addressing historical exclusions in archives. However, the practicality and scalability of implementing feminist standpoint appraisal across various archival contexts present significant challenges that require further investigation.

Christen and Anderson (2019) introduce the concepts of radical empathy and "slow archives," promoting empathetic and collaborative archival practices that emphasize community engagement. Their innovative approach effectively challenges traditional archival methods. However, they do not sufficiently address practical challenges, such as resource constraints and scalability, which could limit broader implementation.

Case Studies

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and Indigenous Archival

Decolonization

One important effort to decolonize archival practices is Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its effect on how Indigenous people are represented in archives. The TRC worked from 2008 to 2015 to address the historical wrongs of the residential school system and to help heal relationships between Indigenous communities and the Canadian government. A key part of the TRC's work was establishing the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). This center serves as a permanent archive that documents testimonies, records, and materials related to residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The TRC's approach shows both successes and challenges in changing archival systems to serve Indigenous people better. It successfully highlighted Indigenous voices and recognized their right to control their historical records. This ensures that future generations can access these important materials. However, challenges remain in fully granting Indigenous governance over these records. There are ongoing concerns about access, privacy, and community control over sensitive materials (McKemmish, 2015). The TRC case study is a key example of how archives can support social justice and reconciliation while also revealing the complexities involved in these efforts.

The Australian Indigenous Community Archives Initiative

A good example of improving archival practices can be found in Australia's Indigenous Community Archives Initiative. This initiative focuses on community-led archiving to help Indigenous people reclaim their knowledge and heritage. Many Indigenous Australian

communities have been left out of mainstream archives or have seen their histories misrepresented. In response, projects like Mukurtu have been created as an open-source digital platform. This platform lets Indigenous communities manage their own cultural materials, ensuring that access follows their cultural rules (Christen, 2018).

This initiative shows a significant change toward Indigenous self-determination in archiving. By allowing communities to control their historical materials, Mukurtu offers a way to digitally decolonize archives. However, there are still challenges. These include finding long-term funding, ensuring that technology remains sustainable, and fitting community-driven archive models into larger institutions (Thorpe & Galassi, 2018). The Australian case study highlights the need for flexible, community-based approaches that respect Indigenous rights while tackling structural and technological issues.

Key Themes and Critical Perspectives

Ethics of Representation

The literature shows that representing marginalized and historically underrepresented communities in archives is ethically complex. Caswell (2016, 2021) looks at how archival representation can either continue historical exclusions or promote inclusive stories. She stresses that archivists must recognize and address power dynamics in their work to avoid repeating past biases. Similarly, Jimerson (2007) argues that ethical representation involves balancing transparency, privacy, and community needs. He points out that archivists have a duty to respect the rights and histories of communities, encouraging careful approaches that improve accountability and ethical practices in archiving. Additionally, discussions about archival

reparative justice highlight the need to recognize past harms and proactively correct imbalances in historical representation.

Access, Community Engagement, and Collaboration

Effective representation relies on how accessible archives are and how well communities engage with them. Ghaddar (2016) and Thorpe (2019) look closely at how strict archival access policies have made it harder for Indigenous communities to reconcile and exercise self-determination. They argue that we need to remove these barriers and create systems that allow Indigenous people to have control over their own archival heritage. On the other hand, Christen and Anderson (2019) highlight new ideas like "radical empathy" and "slow archives." These concepts encourage collaborative work by engaging communities in a meaningful and ongoing way. They show how important it is to include communities in decisions about how archives are managed, described, and cared for. Additionally, scholars suggest that open-access policies and community-driven digital archives could help break down barriers in archives and promote fair stewardship.

Practical Challenges and Limitations

Many people support the idea of changing archival practices to address colonial histories, but there are still important challenges. These include resistance from institutions, limited resources, and a lack of motivation to change. Harris (2002) points out that deep-rooted power dynamics from colonial times make reform difficult. Greene and Meissner (2005) note that traditional processing methods lead to backlogs in archives. Thorpe (2019) and Ghaddar (2016) also highlight the resistance within institutions and the shortage of resources that slow down transformative practices.

While these authors see these challenges, the literature would benefit from more case studies or strategies to handle these issues in different kinds of institutions. Furthermore, concerns about intellectual property, the ethical return of archival materials, and the long-term success of decolonizing efforts still pose major barriers to broad archival reform.

Global and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Global perspectives reveal additional complexities and innovative approaches to the decolonization of archives. In post-colonial countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, archival practices often take different forms based on their unique historical, cultural, and political backgrounds. (Harris, 2002; Ghaddar, 2016). By studying these different strategies, we can learn new ways to address the effects of colonialism on archives (Christen & Anderson, 2019).

Bringing together ideas from fields like anthropology, museum studies, and digital humanities can help create appraisal methods that respect cultural differences and support participatory digital archives (Gilliland, 2011; Christen & Anderson, 2019). Collaborative networks and international platforms have become important tools for discussing decolonization (UNESCO, 2018; Gilliland, 2011). These networks allow archivists to share best practices and learn from experiences worldwide. International guidelines, such as those from UNESCO on preserving Indigenous knowledge, stress the need for ethical standards in decolonizing archives. (UNESCO, 2018)

Despite these efforts, challenges still exist. There are differences in resources, resistance from institutions, and the difficulty of applying global strategies to local situations. Future research should focus on how global cooperation can lead to effective, context-specific decolonization efforts in archival institutions worldwide (Harris, 2002; Ghaddar, 2016).

Implications for Archival Education and Policy

Archival education programs are important for preparing future archivists with the skills they need for meaningful work. Gilliland (2011) points out that these programs should question neutrality and colonial ideas. To support this, they should use inclusive criteria for selecting materials, create clear and engaging descriptions, and update access policies to protect community rights and privacy. These actions help archivists create ethical, inclusive, and fair archival environments. Training programs should also cover topics like cultural understanding, ethical responsibility, and ways to engage with communities. This will ensure that future archivists can contribute to efforts for decolonization in the field.

Gaps and Future Directions

Many studies have examined how to decolonize archival practices, but there are still important gaps in the literature. First, while these studies often critique theoretical ideas, they provide little practical guidance. As a result, archivists may struggle to find examples or case studies to apply these theories in their own work (Caswell, 2016; Jimerson, 2007). Although there are strong critiques of colonial legacies in archives, we need research that goes beyond theory. There is a need for practical strategies that help change archival workflows, policies, and ethical practices.

A key area that needs more attention in discussions about decolonization is the role of digital archives. Digital collections come with special challenges related to how they represent communities, how they can be accessed, and how they are preserved. This is particularly important for communities that want to take control of their own histories (Harris, 2002). Some researchers have looked into how digital platforms can support community-led archiving, but we still don't

fully understand how organizations can create ethical and sustainable digital preservation methods that support decolonizing ideas. Future studies should explore how digital platforms can encourage participatory archiving practices, making sure that historically marginalized communities have control over their digital heritage.

Many studies on decolonizing archives focus on Western countries, mainly in North America, Europe, and Australia. While these studies are helpful, we need more research comparing how different regions, like Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, approach decolonization. Learning about these various methods, especially in postcolonial countries, can show us alternative ways to improve archives.

Future research should address these gaps by exploring practical ways to apply decolonizing strategies in different archival settings. This research should include clear examples and guidelines to help archivists deal with ethical, practical, and institutional challenges (Greene & Meissner, 2005). Additionally, looking at digital archives can reveal how colonial legacies still affect digital spaces and suggest new ways to ensure fair digital preservation and representation (Monks-Leeson, 2011). Lastly, comparing studies from around the world can deepen our understanding of different cultural views on archival decolonization. This can help build a shared knowledge base that supports inclusive and transformative archival practices globally (Ghaddar, 2016; Thorpe, 2019).

Conclusion

This review looks at important insights from research on decolonizing archival practices, focusing on ethical issues and challenges. Scholars like Caswell (2016, 2021), Jimerson (2007), and Ghaddar (2016) stress the need to address colonial legacies in archival institutions. They point

out issues related to representation, neutrality, access, and engagement with communities. Harris (2002) critiques the power dynamics that exist in archives, and Thorpe (2019) argues for Indigenous self-determination through collaborative practices. Case studies, such as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Australian Indigenous Community Archives Initiative, show the successes and challenges of these decolonization efforts.

While these contributions are valuable, there are still gaps in practical guidance and global perspectives. The literature has strong theoretical critiques but lacks detailed case studies, clear policy recommendations, and strategies to overcome resistance within institutions. Future research should investigate how digital archival practices connect with decolonization efforts, offering practical methods to include ethical and community-centered approaches.

This review highlights the importance of ethical decolonizing practices. Archivists should work to confront historical biases, support inclusive representation, and prioritize fair collaboration with communities. Engaging with this literature has deepened my understanding of archival responsibilities. It has reinforced the need for ethical and socially just methods. By reflecting on these ideas, I aim to incorporate them into my work, promoting transparency, inclusivity, and fairness in archival stewardship.

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