ARCHIVAL OUTLOOK

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Toward Inclusive Reading Rooms

Recommendations for Decolonizing Practices and Welcoming Indigenous Researchers

SAA Native American Archives Section and Human Rights Archives Section

In an effort to create more inclusive spaces for tribal users, many archival institutions with Indigenous materials in their collections are moving away from longstanding practices and creating new ones. For example, some institutions no longer require evidence of "serious" scholar/researcher status and are adapting to support community-based scholars as primary constituents. In line with SAA's endorsement of the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, a growing number have begun to "involve communities in creating welcoming and comfortable spaces for Native American visitors and rethink the need for 'credentials' from patrons."[1] Many institutions provide Indigenous researchers with comment forms that help archivists make changes to an item's record. The most progressive institutions may have ceremonial rooms for community practices such as smudging before handling sacred documents.

These practices are steps in a more inclusive direction. At a meeting between the SAA Native American Archives Section (NAAS) and the Human Rights Archives Section (HRAS), members discussed the current culture of archival reading rooms and how to start the process of decolonizing them. Below are some examples of institutional archives that have introduced culturally-responsive practices for their Native users as well as recommendations for institutions to continue fostering welcoming environments.

Institutions Introducing Change

- The reading room in the Library and Archives at the **Autry Museum of the American West** in Los Angeles was designed with tribal users in mind. The Braun Research Library collection has been accessible to tribal communities since 1977, and its move to the Autry's new Resources Center prompted staff to create spaces where tribal consultations and exchange of information can be done in open or secluded settings. A separate viewing room allows for private viewing of library and archival material and can accommodate small groups. A separate listening room, also designed for small groups, allows for users to privately listen and watch sound recordings and audiovisual material.
- The **Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives** (part of the National Museum of Natural History) uses a ceremonial room in the Museum Support Center to allow researchers to conduct smudging or other cultural activities during their visits to the archives. The Visitor Agreement Form that all researchers sign asks researchers to contact relevant Indigenous communities about their research projects. The archives also provides "Information Please" forms, which ask for user corrections to metadata and description.
- The **Cultural Resources Center (CRC) of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian Archives Center** provides Native users with a designated room and access to an outside wooded area for reflection and ceremonial use during researchers' appointments at the archives. Tours and staff orientations involve a description of the Native ideas that shaped the architectural space, as well as the care of items and their arrangement in collections spaces. CRC also encourages researchers' corrections and additions to records information on a reading room sheet.
- The **American Philosophical Society** in Philadelphia removed its requirement of scholarly status to access materials and allows communities to work in groups in an adjacent reading space to its archives. Community-based researchers are not only able to take photos of documents but may also request scanned copies free of charge.
- **The City of New Orleans Archives** requires no ID to enter. This model in some public archives is a useful one to remove the barrier and historical trauma of being asked for government documentation.

Rethinking Security Processes

Despite progress in these institutions, wider cultural change is needed. Strict security processes, photography policies, and an overall culture of surveillance in many archives perpetuates the long history of distrust between Native people and colonial institutions; these policies often evoke historical trauma for Native and Indigenous researchers.

At the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), for example, staff monitors are present in research rooms to ensure proper records handling and prevent theft. Depending on the NARA facility, uniformed security guards may also be present in rooms where original records are used. Staff monitors are trained to identify potential thieves. Signs reminding visitors to "be vigilant—there are thieves among us" have been posted near research rooms.

There is certainly precedent for researchers stealing from NARA.[2] However, some thefts at NARA have also been perpetuated by staff with privileged access to records. Some researchers might feel uncomfortable having staff surveil them while they work, and monitors likely struggle to strike the balance between protecting historical records and assuming the worst about researchers. Emphasizing customer service and inclusive behaviors as part of training is one way to begin to balance these perspectives.

Taking Action

NAAS and HRAS members began compiling a list of other necessary actions—presented in three broad categories—that archives and archivists can take to break the cycle of distrust and begin the important reparative work of connecting people in safe spaces to their histories and knowledge.

1. Decolonize Archives Spaces

- Invite Indigenous communities or groups to participate in events or to hold their own activities at a repository or institution's reading room. Adjust visitation policies to allow for Tribal delegations that consist of larger groups.
- Develop relationships with local tribes and consult with them to create an Indigenous land acknowledgement statement for your repository. Include all tribes present in a region throughout history. Create signage or an installation dedicated to the Indigenous land acknowledgement.
- Consider how information and signage presented on institutional tours may reinforce ideas rooted in colonialism and white supremacy. Update interpretations to give equal prioritization to oral histories and Indigenous ways of knowing, and acknowledge past failures to do so.
- Understand that the information contained in some collections is sacred to Indigenous peoples while other records can be traumatic. Develop staff who practice cultural safety and cultural humility so that Indigenous researchers enter a space that is safe, supportive, and respectful. Provide a separate space where researchers can go to process their emotions, if needed.
- Advocate for ceremonial rooms to be adopted more universally.
- Purchase Indigenous artwork to display in reading rooms, thereby showing respect and acknowledgement to Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. Consult with experts like Tribal archives, libraries, and museums (TALMs), the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB), the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts. Select works by Indigenous artists with cultural ties to the land where your repository is located.
- Create an exhibition area to showcase Indigenous collections. Consult with Tribal elders and community

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members to ensure that materials are appropriately described and displayed.

2. Create Proactive Staff Policies

- Share information about and updates to security procedures and access policies digitally so researchers are aware of them before they visit. Consider using videos to show—not just tell—researchers what to expect when they arrive.
- Connect directly with Indigenous researchers, whether by email or phone, before they visit to develop relationships and better prepare them for the in-person research experience.
- Create policies that allow for the return of digital surrogates of intangible cultural materials to their source communities with minimal or no fees. Communities should not have to buy back their own cultural knowledge.
- Remove barriers and obstacles to access by creating outreach programs for Indigenous communities that do not have funds to send community scholars to repositories.
- Hire more Indigenous staffers or invite community elders and other community members to consult at institutions.

3. Promote Cultural Competency

- Learn, implement, and practice cultural humility and cultural safety as they relate to Indigenous peoples. Share information with staff about behaviors that are disrespectful to Indigenous community members and researchers from other diverse backgrounds.
- Develop a nuanced awareness and understanding of cultural sensitivities around ancestral remains and funerary items. Be aware that sensitivities, protocols, and taboos are different for different people and communities. For example, if ancestral remains or funerary items are in the room or building, people may not be able to enter or may need to pray or prepare themselves before entering. Be ready to provide information about such items before and during researcher visits.
- Recognize that Indigenous researchers from Tribal cultural heritage departments, committees, etc., are representatives of sovereign Nations. Respect elders and community members' cultural knowledge and expertise.
- Educate staff about the specific Indigenous cultures represented in collections so they can better relate to Indigenous researchers. Build and maintain relationships with Indigenous scholars and communities to improve their research experience.
- Offer continuing education or training courses to staff that focus on cultural competency and are taught by Indigenous community members who are stakeholders at the institution. Examine and challenge personal biases and assumptions about Indigenous peoples.
- Understand that an archivist's roles and responsibilities to Indigenous materials go beyond preservation and access; archivists are responsible for restoring materials to the community of origin. Advocate for cultural competency training in MLIS programs, where students can learn appropriate practices before becoming staff in research rooms.

SAA and the non-Tribal archival community still have a lot of work to do to repair historical relationships and reputations, earn trust, and welcome Native and Indigenous researchers to archives. Although we are beginning to see more culturally-responsive practices in institutions, these recommendations to decolonize physical spaces, implement new staff policies, and educate archivists in cultural competency will allow the change we want to see to begin in earnest. ■

Notes

Contributions to this piece were collectively made by Rose Buchanan, Keau George, Taylor Gibson, Eric Hung, Daria Labinsky, Diana Marsh, Rachel Menyuk, Lotus Norton-Wisla, Selena Ortego-Chiolero, Nathan Sowry, and Monique Tyndall. We are also grateful to NAAS and HRAS members whose discussions shaped this piece—particularly to Ricky Punzalan, who sparked a conversation about this topic during our joint annual meeting. Please note that all opinions are our own and do not necessarily reflect the views of our respective institutions.

[1] First Archivist Circle, *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, *http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/protocols.html*.

[2] NARA, "Notable Thefts From The National Archives," *https://www.archives.gov/research/recover/notable-thefts.html*.