The Archive in Contemporary Indigenous Art

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
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Back on the hill, my father and son sat together looking at black-and-white photos from the old man’s school days. “And there were little guys there just like you,” Ndède said to his grandson.

—Wab Kinew (Onigaming Ojibwe)1

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

THE 2007 UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples clearly and succinctly recognizes the necessity for Indigenous peoples to preserve and reclaim their cultural identity. As such, it acknowledges “the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples, which derive from their political, economic, and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories, and philosophies.”2 Artists and scholars have drawn their attention to cultures, spiritual traditions, histories, and perspectives.3

Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, the archive casts a long shadow of potential for renewing Indigenous knowledge, language, heritage, family lineage, treaty rights, sovereignty, land claims, spirituality, and storytelling.4 The historical Indian may be the captive of the archives. “No longer ‘captives’ but instead miners of the archive,” writes Foster, “archivists in their own right, even theorists or commentators of the archive.” Yet, under this rudimentary umbrella of engagement, conditions of archival play remain unstable and unfolding, due to the fact that, until recent times, agency of and access to government-controlled archives have been predominantly restricted to European men since contact. The historian William T. Hagan understood this phenomenon better than most of his contemporaries, and in 1978 he wrote, “But think of the damage we can do the Indians. The historical Indian may be the captive of the archives.” No longer “captives” but instead miners of the archive, contemporary Indigenous artists redress the problem of agency while Indigenous activists target the crisis of access. Together, they seek to decolonize the archive.

Post-structuralist archival theory continues to drive the critical discourse surrounding Indigenous archives, and while it does not always align with conventional Indigenous aesthetics, it has proven to be a productive tool for deconstructing the complicated relationship between Indigenous aesthetics, political resistance, and archival practices. Visual artists began exploring the archive following the events of World War II, when the threat of global erasure dominated popular regimes of thought.

Art critic Hal Foster maintains that it was not until the early 2000s that many artists caught archive fever. What he classifies as the “archival impulse” attempts to define a generation of artists who excavate “lost or suppressed” historical information—including image, object, and/or text—and labor to animate its material once more. The archival impulse represents a cogent movement of artists who translate archival substance into the stuff of aesthetics. As it happens, Foster’s key examples of this movement are limited to non-Indigenous, mostly male, European artists. However, his conceptual framework is particularly useful when addressing the reclamation of individual, collective, and cultural memory through archival registers, be they familial, museological, tribal, or otherwise.

2. The author asks the reader to observe that he is of Euro-Canadian descent.
reanimation of Indigenous cultural material through archival art, coupled with its critical renarration, is one of the most important contributions to the sustained decolonization of the archive in the Americas.

In this essay, I trace the vicissitudes of archival discourse as it relates to Indigenous cultural material, with special attention to the ways in which settler colonialism has affected systems of collection, interpretation, and categorization. My close readings of several case studies examine how contemporary Indigenous artists delve into the archive as a mode of resistance against the vectors of colonialism. Artists including Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band Cherokee), Marie Watt (Seneca), and Barry Ace Goshorn (Eastern Band Cherokee), among many others, stay connected, to restoring the unrestored, dedicated to connecting the disconnected, to restoring the unrestored, to drawing lines of flight between what was and what is. For if cultural memory is perfect, if the archive contained everything it should, if archival meaning is finite, then what connect the disconnected at all?8

The Archive and the Archivist

JACQUES DERRIDA admits that “nothing is less . . . clear today than the word ‘archive.’” 9 The semantics encapsulating the word archive force it to exist in a liminal state, somewhere between an abstract concept and a tangible reality. In conversations of archival discourse, the archive has become the signifier for a cosmology of ideas related to the collection, repository, and content of materials housed within cultural institutions. Still, the discursive conflation of libraries, museums, and archives continues to problematize the very identity of the archive itself. 10 While archival identity proves tricky to locate, its connection to power is axiomatic. For Michel Foucault, the archive proceeds as an instrument of authority operating out of hegemonic systems of judgment, structure, and experience: “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events [. . .] composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from far off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale.”11 Arguably, however, Derrida most convincingly asserts that the technical structure of the archive decides its content and thus its lasting significance to cultural memory; that which does not fit within the organizational structure and character of “archivization” becomes lost to history and subsequently disappears.12 In this light, the acceptance of ethnographic material into the archive essentially legitimizes a people’s cultural identity by demonstrating the inherent value of their historical record. Complex power relations flexing within archival procedures and practices make clear that those charged with its oversight filter its materials to produce an official picture of history, nationalism, and cultural identity. Hence, the colonial archive is intrinsically flawed in that it tells a story in biased fragments—if it tells a story at all—rather than a linear, objective, and comprehensive narrative of events and histories affecting Indigenous peoples. But there is more to the burden of the archive. As Indigenous peoples subjected to colonial hegemony repeatedly suffered forced segregation to reserves, they were similarly relegated to archival reserves as well; those abstract, demarcated spaces of the colonial archive set aside for “vanishing” peoples. As follows, the decolonization of the archive also involves its demythologization.

University of Oregon historian and archivist Jennifer R. O’Neal (Confederated Grand Ronde Tribes) contends that few North American tribes generated written records until the mid-20th century, and those that did had their archival collections diffused among federal government agencies and institutions, far removed from tribal communities. 13 The scarcity of Indigenous historical materials in colonial archives can be attributed to modes of Indigenous pedagogy or representation that do not fit comfortably with the European epistemological model. If Indigenous language functions as a repository of history, ideas, and information, then the body could be considered a vessel that communicates a sonic archive. The lack of archival content among some Indigenous tribes in North America may have very little to do with a failure of collecting practices but more to do with the idea that knowledge is transmitted through listening rather than gathering objects or artifacts. Like concerns over blood quantum, the archive can also speak to the ways that “settler colonialism is realized on and through” the Indigenous body.14

In the United States, a move toward archival decolonization is progressing as collaborative work between Indigenous and non-Indigenous repositories develop. Grassroots activism during the restoration era of the 1960s and 1970s promoted the return of tribal history and rights while establishing educational training for the security and preservation of Indigenous collections.15 The foundations for this archival program, as O’Neal argues, were laid little more than 30 years ago by activist and scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Dakota) in his influential 1978 report, “The Right to Know,” prepared for the White House Preconference on Indian Library and Information Services On or Near Reservations. In his report, Deloria maintains that the US federal government should directly fund tribal communities in the construction and maintenance of libraries, information services, and archival repositories. He also believed that the government must uphold treaty rights related to tribal education initiatives, positing that the government “need to know; to know the past, to know the traditional alternatives advocated by their ancestors, to know the specific experiences of their communities, and to know about the world that surrounds them.”16 Deloria’s report espouses the sovereignty of Indigenous cultural memory, knowledge, information, and thus the decolonization of the archive itself.17 The right to self-determination defines Indigenous cultural identity and is central to the project of decolonization.

The Art of the Archive

FEDERALLY OVERSEEN ARCHIVES, particularly in Canada, have presented Indigenous peoples as the nation’s official Other, constituting a nameless, homogenous, stereotypical, and frozen-in-time people subjugated under the colonial and anthropological project. Positioned against this colonial legacy of archival annexation, early archival art interventions by visual artists such as Jeff Thomas (Mohawk), Rosalie Favell (Métis), Clyde Stadra (Mohawk), and Jane Ash Poitras (Cree) redress established meanings contained in the archive and implode its systematic misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples and their project of resistance. These artists repeated target and deconstruct volumes of photographs, documents, records, materials, and memories inscribed therein to those archival materials that project cultural or historical

8. Foster, Bad New Days, 60; Foster suggests that the Archival Art movement emerges out of a “failure in cultural memory . . . For why else connect things if they did not appear disconnected in the first place”? 8


10. Ibid.


16. Ibid., 2

17. Ibid., 3; O’Neal goes on to say, “Endorsed within this call to action is Deloria’s recognition that information and knowledge are central to the sovereignty and self-determination of Native nations. Thus, this paper aims to analyze this historic charge, both in regards to the development of tribal archives as a recognition of independence from the federal government and the work being done by non-Native repositories, specifically how the West in particular participated in these movements historically.”

The work of Shan Goshorn emerges from a precipice over- looking established methodologies, archival images, and 21st-century aesthetics. She introduces historical photos and documents from cultural institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian and the National Anthropological Archives into her practice of weaving based on Cherokee basket-making techniques. Reflecting on her engagement with these archives, Goshorn remembers: "While many of the photographs were available to view online, the experience of holding the photo in your hands—being able to examine the front, the back, and read any handwritten notes scrawled in the margins—was invaluable. By holding the image, the historical relevance became very real to me—I could picture the people in front of me as well as the photographer behind the lens and the equipment used. Often I could feel a presence or emotion associated with the object."11 The surface of her baskets reveal a topography of Indigenous experience, while at their heart these works reference archival photographs, rewrite documents of subjugation, and reweave fabrics of colonialism into a new narrative. Goshorn interrogates the ontological status of Indigenous imagery arrested in photographic archives as they endure somewhere between evidence and document, public memory and private history.12 For example, the single-weave basket 10 Little Indians (2013), now in the collection of the Heard Museum, displays two historical photographs of ten Indigenous boys from various tribes on opposite sides of the basket. On one side, a group of boys is posed in front of the camera on the day of their arrival in 1878 at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia, sporting conventional tribal hairstyles and blankets. On the opposite side, the boys in the photo wear military uniforms with short, slick hair at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The palpable visual and ideological contrast between the tribal and the colonial is coded here through the blanket and the uniform, as government-sponsored assimilation policies. Clothing in these archival photographs signifies the ruinous dialectic between cultural potency and cultural loss. Beyond the pain of the images, Goshorn further identifies their social complexity in relation to conditions of labor by implying that forms of unfamiliar and/or coerced labor, be it military, manual, or otherwise, is still forced labor. Juxtaposed alongside the two archival images are lyrics of the popular 1868 song by Septimus Winner, “Ten Little Injuns.”13 An example of the prevalent, prejudiced songs of post-Civil War America, the musical score to “Ten Little Injuns” is woven into the basket near its center to further emphasize its indexical (albeit false) relationship to the ten boys in the photographs. Circumnavigating the inside of the basket is a dancing young child masquerading as “Indian,” an illustration Goshorn appropriated from a printed music sheet of “Ten Little Indians.”14

19. Payne and Thomas, “Aboriginal Interventions into the Photographic Archives.”

ABOVE: Marie Watt (Seneza), Witness, 2015, reclaimed wool blanket, embroidery floss, thread, 30 × 76 cm. Photo: Aaron Johanson. Both images courtesy of the artist. Below: Reverend Tate, Quamichan Potlatch, Coast Salish, photograph, 1913, collection of the Royal BC Museum and Archives. Injun’s.” Finally, written along the apex edge of the basket are the tribal names of the Hampton Institute boys, effectively replacing their given European names with their given, proper, tribal names. 10 Little Indians is a capsule for animating the archive and for renarrating its most critical and underrepresented histories. It disrupts the tendency to position Europe at the center of the colonial archive and instead repositions Indigenous people and perspective at its center, thereby exposing distortions in the historical record.16 Here is represented the subjectivities of loss, both of the archive and of the individual, within a matrix of remembrance and recovery.

While Goshorn employs the photographic archives of federal institutions to reclaim lost histories and reconnect to ancestors through customary, Cherokee art-making techniques, Marie Watt situates archival material as the impetus for building community. In her practice, Watt commonly hosts free, public art events such as sewing circles to create
artwork that elicits and shares stories between individuals, groups, and tribes. In doing so, she draws connections between tangible, handheld materials, their complex history, and the people who stimulate them.

Nowhere is this clearer than in her work Witness (2015). Similar to Goshorn, who weaves archival photographs into customary basket forms, Watt reclaims a conventional Hudson’s Bay Company four-stripe, point blanket by superimposing and stitching the outlines of an appropriated, archival photograph into its fibers using embroidery floss and thread. The photograph, from the Royal British Columbia Museum and Archives, documents a 1913 Quamichan potlatch ceremony. In the original image, now marked by decades of entropy, two figures perched atop a roof toss a blanket down below, where the camera captures at the perfect moment. During a potlatch ceremony, noble tribal members gifted their accumulated goods to less privileged members of the community as a way to distribute wealth. However, an 1884 amendment to the Dominion of Canada’s Indian Act banned all potlatch ceremonies (the ban was lifted in 1951).

Other works in the series borrow from the floating blanket found in the original photograph and manifest it as a central trope, effectively creating a number of blankets from one. Watt has come to see blankets as a symbol of the peripatetic, as objects that travel from place to place, implying that they should come as no surprise that the blanket. This gesture operates as a kind of exhumation of the archived (and subjugated) Indigenous body, breathing new life into previously hermetic images, experiences, and communities. In this sense, then, it should come as no surprise that the blankets are, at least conceptually, returned to the people who were forbidden by law to accept them, and that their image now thrives in the light of the warm blanket rather than the dark of the cold filing cabinet. Similar to Watt’s culling of the photographic archive, Barry Ace mulls through personal and collective archives to unearth indexical relationships to the specters of history framed within contemporary aesthetics. In his own words, “I’m always drawing from resources that I know about and try to bring that forward and basically build that relationship between the contemporary and the historical.” 26 Due to the collision between customary techniques such as beadwork and Western sculptural paradigms, the work appears barely contained within its material—set at any moment to explode. It is evidence of what Ace calls an “intentional disruption via the use of various mixed-media treatments.” 27 His critical attention to the constantly shifting paradigms of cultural meanings and values streams from respectively appropriating and innovating historical tradition.

Ace’s mining of the archive is right to archival agency and sourced directly from family photo albums and ephemera. Take, for instance, the honorary mixed-media work For King and Country (2015), a tinted photograph of the artist’s father dressed in his military service uniform framed by wooden sticks and set against a backdrop of birch bark scroll adorned with floral beadwork and an image of a white thunderbird. Above the photograph of the artist’s father sits the text “For King and Country” while below reads “Denied the Vote Until 1960.” Until 1960, Indigenous peoples in Canada had to repeal their treaty rights and Native status just to vote in official elections. “Here were men and women,” says Ace, “who were fighting a war yet denied the franchise.” 28 The irony of fighting—and potentially dying—for one’s king and country when one is denied the right to vote cuts deep through the title and the text as much as it does with the viewer. This photograph becomes archived itself as a marker of colonial transgression. 29 Comparable to Goshorn’s work, its formal appearance emulates that of a shrine commemorating the sacrifice of Ace’s father and those of other Indigenous men and women. Ace’s appropriation of a family photograph coded with political injustice, then later transformed into a memorial space, demonstrates the propensity of artists to reframe the ideological conditions of archival material.

Conclusion

THE PROJECT OF ARCHIVAL RENEWAL

The 1960s and ’70s has snowballed into a structured and sustained program of recovery demonstrated by the increasing number of tribal archives, Indigenous archival associations, and professional Indigenous archivists. Speaking on the close relationship between archives and cultural renewal, Susan Feller (Choctaw), president and CEO of the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums, proposes: Archives are essential not only because they “remember” culture and history but because they document it and ensure greater authenticity. Archival recordings have helped restore extinct languages; documents have helped in successfully litigating treaty rights; photographs have helped renew art forms, and oral histories have helped sustain traditional knowledge. 30

The cultural significance of collecting and preserving Indigenous materials in archival repositories to reflect Indigenous knowledge has motivated many archival activists. Such knowledge can evolve as a result and aesthetics are collected and disseminated. Although the discursive character of the archive has shifted with the presence of the digital—and with it levels of engagement with institutional repositories—this much is clear: the paradigms of gather, interpret, archive, and repeat remain a constant and insist on connecting the disconnected.

24. Enwezor, 12. According to Enwezor, “Photography is simultaneously the documentary evidence and the archival record of such transactions. Because the written work of the anthropologists, historians, and others is as close as we can come to understanding the lives of our ancestors. Each of the documents holds knowledge that we are eager to hear and in some cases to regain … The poetry, the songs, the regalia, the daily conversations in our Native tongue record valuable information for those who come after us.”

25. The “right to know” that Deloria once spoke of can be translated as a right to archival agency and access to archival authority. The determinacy over one’s history is intricately bound in the determinacy over oneself (and vice versa). Today, digital and film camera technology, coupled with the digital archive of the Internet, with its rhizomatic social networks and apps, have fundamentally transformed the way Indigenous language, knowledge, and aesthetics are collected and disseminated. Although the discursive character of the archive has shifted with the presence of the digital—and with it levels of engagement with institutional repositories—this much is clear: the paradigms of gather, interpret, archive, and repeat remain a constant and insist on connecting the disconnected.


29. Enwezor, Archiving the Ever, 23. According to Enwezor, “Photography is simultaneously the documentary evidence and the archival record of such transactions. Because the camera is literacy an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is a priori an archival object.”
