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Digital Repatriation in the Field of Indigenous Anthropology

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As the term “digital repatriation” gains wider circulation, it has come under increased scrutiny and criticism. At the 2010 American Anthropological Association meetings in New Orleans, Kim Christen convened an Executive Program Committee session entitled “After the Return: Digital Repatriation and the Circulation of Indigenous Knowledge.” Despite abundant examples of how digital technology creates opportunities for working in partnership with indigenous communities, questions focused on the inadequacies of the term “digital repatriation.” Panelist Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science stated the problem most succinctly by recounting that the Native communities he worked with always wanted to know if “digital repatriation” meant that they were going to get the original materials back. The answer, of course, was no.

Part of the problem, it seems, is that the term ‘repatriation’ is so strongly tied to NAGPRA, with its attendant expectations of the original’s return and the painful memories of claims denied. Implicit in this association is the assumption that digital repatriation applies solely to material culture. Thus, difficult questions emerge about whether a digital surrogate can ever adequately stand in for the original.

The dilemmas of digital repatriation in the context of museums should not, however, preclude fuller discussion of how this new technology can be used in other areas of indigenous anthropology. Explorations of digital reprography’s possibilities have recently shifted to collaborative efforts among anthropologists, communities, and archives with significant holdings of indigenous images, recordings, and ethnographic documents. Here expectations shift. One striking difference is that most indigenous communities would prefer to receive digital reproductions of songs or photos rather than, say, the original wax cylinder or negative.

At the American Philosophical Society (APS), where I am Director of Native American Projects, an alternative model has recently been introduced: a “digital knowledge sharing initiative.” Two Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grants are supporting APS’s efforts to digitize its entire collection of Native American and First Nations audio recordings, totaling more than 3000 hours, including 75 languages from 33 indigenous language families. The grant also creates a prototype Native American Fellows program with four indigenous communities—Ojibwe, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Penobscot, and Tuscarora—that allows language teachers, elders, and college students to do research at APS and scan archival materials related to the recordings in order to build digital archives back home.

These efforts have led to the creation of *indigenous* digital archives. The cataloguing system developed by communities includes new fields---clan affiliation, orthographic transcriptions of indigenous names, genealogical information, etc---that make it easier for community members to find ancestors and traditional practices in the archive. Typically, collections at APS are catalogued by the name of the anthropologist who collected the materials, often neglecting the names of Native informants. By foregrounding the indigenous wisdom keepers, singers, and speakers, we are beginning the process of decolonizing the archives.

As another important outcome, we have been challenged to discuss protocols for culturally sensitive speech, images, and data. Because NAGPRA guidelines do not apply to archival materials, the Society of American Archivists has been unable to agree on best practices and protocols for access. Our discussions with the project's Native American advisory board are thus extremely important as indigenous anthropology moves into the digital age.

Although the original documents and recordings will remain at APS, the project constitutes a historic paradigm shift. Valuable materials that have long been isolated in archives inaccessible to tribes and First Nations are now being revived for use in language preservation and cultural revitalization programs in their communities of origin. The benefits of this digital knowledge sharing initiative should reach well beyond the four communities partnering in the initial study. Once the 3000 hours of songs, stories, and linguistic materials have been digitized, the costs for reproduction will drop dramatically, and accessibility is expected to increase. Since the project started in 2008, the APS has filled requests for digitized materials from 70 indigenous communities and/or anthropologists working in partnership with tribes and First Nations. As word spreads and other archives move to digitize their collections, more material will become available for sharing with indigenous communities. Thus, although digital sharing does not result in direct "repatriation" as expected under NAGPRA, it does produce returns of great value.

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