

Timothy B. Powell

A Drum Speaks: A Partnership to Create a Digital Archive Based on Traditional Ojibwe Systems of Knowledge

*I want to take back, as an ambassador to my people [the Ojibwe], that new lesson I learned [at the Penn Museum (UPM)], we no longer have to be afraid of having pictures taken because they don't steal the spirit of what's being taken. They can invigorate and enliven and inspire knowledge and wisdom and learning ... Digital imaging is a new thing ... that can [bring to life these Ojibwe artifacts] for our kids and our generation ... We're going to digitally image some of the things and take them back to our people ... All of these things we have in the museum are alive. With our great care and respect they can come alive for our people and teach them again that this is a learning place.*¹—Larry Aitken, Sacred Pipe Carrier, Leech Lake Band of the Ojibwe Nation, and Director of American Indian Studies Program at Itasca Community College

In the winter of 2007, when Larry Aitken—one of those rare intellectuals who possess both esteemed tribal and academic credentials—came to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, it represented a meeting of two powerful realms that rarely intersect.² It was a historic moment, for a member of the Ojibwe *Midewiwin* (Grand Medicine Society) to perform a Sacred Pipe Ceremony in the courtyard of the museum and to offer prayers for past wrongs and open wounds that occurred when sacred objects, taken from the Ojibwe community, ended up in the museum. The ceremony served “to awaken” the Ojibwe (or Anishinaabe, as the tribe calls itself) artifacts so that they can be digitized and, in this form, returned to the Ojibwe people to be used in language preservation and cultural revitalization. Aitken’s tribal knowledge, his courage to confront these difficult questions, and his infectious spirit provide, in retrospect, a unique oppor-

1. *Weweni* (“Be Careful”), video produced by David McDonald, DMCD Productions, 2007.

2. I would like offer my most sincere thanks to Larry Aitken, David McDonald, Barbara McDonald, Harold Annette, Tom Peacock, Sonny Peacock, Nyleta Belgarde, Andy Favorite, Judy Fairbanks, Freeman Owle, T. J. Holland, Lynne Harlan, Lou Jackson, Barbara McCaskill, Toby Graham, Bridget Anderson, David McKnight, Bob Preucel, and Lucy Williams for all that they have taught me. Any mistakes are entirely my own, for which I take full responsibility.

tunity to rethink the differences between how the Ojibwe remember their cultural past and the cataloguing system employed by academic curators, librarians, and archivists. As the Director of the Center for Native American Studies and a Senior Research Scientist at the Penn Museum, I have been both inspired and challenged by Aitken's words—"we no longer have to be afraid of having pictures taken because they don't steal the spirit of what's being taken. They can invigorate and enliven and inspire knowledge and wisdom and learning."³ Larry Aitken, of course, speaks only for himself. His authority derives, in part, from the seventeen years he served Jim Jackson, one of the most distinguished Ojibwe Medicine Men of the late 20th century, as an *oshkaabewis* ("ceremonial messenger" or "translator").⁴ What his words suggest, to my mind, is that a historic moment is at hand for librarians, museum curators, scholars, archivists, and digital designers, a time when these custodians of culture can truly begin to work in partnership with Native people. Many complex issues, however, remain unresolved.

It is important to emphasize that this historic shift should not be based on forgetting. The shameful practices of "collecting" artifacts that rightfully belong to Native peoples continues to this day and many museums are filled with sacred objects and human remains that silently testify to the fact that anthropologists and looters did "steal the spirit" of the Ojibwe people and many other tribes.⁵ This memory must be acknowledged and addressed. In the spirit of awareness of the past/present and hope for the future, this article explores how digital technology can be used to catalog, preserve, and digitize objects created by the Ojibwe of northern Minnesota. These objects include artifacts, books, maps, manuscripts, videos, oral histories, and historical photographs. The partners in this project—the Penn Museum, the University of Pennsylvania Library's Schoenberg Center for Electronic Texts and Images, Itasca Community College, White Earth Tribal and Community College, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, the University of Minnesota, Duluth—are working in concert to place these cultural objects in a richly detailed digital environment that will more accurately reflect how the Ojibwe *re-collect* their own past.

We are fortunate at the Penn Museum (UPM) to have a very effective Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGRA) program and to host many highly

3. *Weweni* ("Be Careful").

4. *A Concise Dictionary of Minnesota Ojibwe*, eds. John D. Nichols and Earl Nyholm (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), translates *oshkaabewis* as "ceremonial attendant, ceremonial messenger," p. 110. Aitken often describes his relationship to Jim Jackson as an *oshkaabewis*, which he defines as a "go-between."

5. See Winona Laduke, *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (Boston: South End Press, 2005); and *Repatriation Reader: Who Owns American Indian Remains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

respected Native elders and artists who come to visit tribal objects stored at UPM. Such visits do not, sadly, often involve librarians, archivists, or information technology specialists. This article will describe a unique project that Larry Aitken named “*Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* (‘To Sanction, To Give Authority, To Bring to Life’),” which includes all of these constituents. The multiple metaphorical meanings inherent in this phrase embody the concept that provides the heart and soul of the project: the belief that it is possible to sanction Ojibwe intellectual sovereignty to give authority to those entrusted by the tribe with keeping its history, and to bring to life these ancient codes in new, digital forms.⁶ The Ojibwe, it is important to remember, are known as the “Keepers of Writing” because of their archives of ancient scrolls.⁷ Creating the archive, however, requires maintaining a fragile yet intellectually powerful coalition of Sacred Pipe Carriers, drum keepers, tribal historians, and Ojibwe scholars working together with digital librarians, technicians, archivists, keepers, curators, and the Digital Partnerships with Native American Communities program at Penn.

This article represents a report back from beyond the cutting edge about a project that is, at the time of this writing, still more imagination than terabytes, metadata, and XML codes. The *Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* digital archive project faces a series of extremely sensitive, perhaps unprecedented, questions that will constitute the epistemological basis for the analysis that follows:

- 1) Does digital media inadvertently encode western epistemologies into the programming, design, and interface of Web-based learning environments, thereby alienating (albeit unintentionally) students and teachers from historically underrepresented groups?
- 2) What would a digital archive—composed of lesson plans, syllabi, artifacts, historic maps, and digital videos of tribal elders explaining the cultural significance of artifacts—look like if designed in close cooperation with respected members of Ojibwe communities?
- 3) Is digital technology, despite its association with postmodernism, actually better able to represent and integrate traditional “texts”—such as oral histories, beadwork, pictographs etched on birch bark, dance, drumming, and songs—than its predecessor, print culture?

6. For an example of the digital archive, see <http://www.boozhoo.net>.

7. For more on the history of Ojibwe writing systems, see Walter James Hoffman, “The Midewiwin or ‘Grand Medicine Society’ of the Ojibway,” *Bureau of American Ethnology*, Seventh Annual Report, Washington, D.C., 1891; Selwyn Dewdney, *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibway* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Thomas Peacock and Marlene Wisuri, *Ojibwe Waasa Inaabidaa: We Look in All Directions* (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002), 65–89.

- 4) How can an understanding of digital media's educational possibilities be enhanced for librarians, scholars, and students by listening carefully to elders, tribal college teachers, and even high school students on the Ojibwe reservations?

I make no claim to being able to provide definitive answers to these questions, many of which have yet to be fully explored or even prominently posed in either academic or Ojibwe communities. Instead, I have taken up the guest editors' generous offer to "feel free to move beyond the present, and envision what the future of your collection, institution, or research will be."⁸ In this spirit, the following is a highly personal, completely idiosyncratic view of how these questions might be addressed. I speak humbly, as just one participant in a large collaborative effort that operates under the fundamental assumption that no one individual possesses all the answers. This consortium strives to work in concert, with an awareness that the knowledge provided by each of the partners constitutes an integral and equal part of the larger project.

Lessons Learned the Hard Way

Projects like this one require an extensive knowledge of Ojibwe language and culture. I am exceedingly fortunate to be able to learn from gifted teachers whose knowledge comes from very different sources than the archives of academe. I am but a neophyte in this world, all too aware of what I do not know. As the Creek/Muscogee poet Joy Harjo so beautifully states the problem in her poem "A Map to the Next World," one must begin with an acceptance of the fact that "an imperfect map will have to do."⁹ My own journey began, without any map in hand, when I left the familiar terrain of the Department of English at the University of Georgia, from which I had just received tenure. Lured by the vibrant unknown and exhilarating possibilities of the digital age, I set off to find where the white page ended and new possibilities for representing the wondrous stories of the Native American tradition awaited. The first place I arrived was the Digital Library of Georgia (DLG), which had just won an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant in 1999 (renewed in 2000), to digitize more than two thousand historical documents related to Cherokee culture for the *Southeastern Native American Documents, 1730–1842* (SENAD) project.¹⁰ Working on this collaborative effort provided me with a wealth of knowledge—literary, historical, archival, and digital—and, at the same time, a painful awareness of the unforeseen problems

8. Kathleen Burns and Penny Welbourne, "Announcement for Special Issue of *RBM*, Fall 2007," personal correspondence.

9. Joy Harjo, *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975–2001* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 130.

10. Digital Library of Georgia, <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu>.

that arise when projects about Native American culture are conducted without the expertise of any tribal members, even if the digital work is done by the best intentioned, most highly skilled, and impeccably credentialed non-Native staff and scholars.

My initial role in the SENAD project consisted primarily of advising which historical documents should be included in the digital archive. As the project moved on to the next phase, I became more involved with tagging, writing metadata, cataloging, and finally disseminating information about the archive. On one level, the SENAD archive was a remarkable success. The viewer is presented with a digital (JPEG or TIFF) image of the original handwritten document and an electronic transcription, tagged in SGML, which allows all two thousand documents to be searched simultaneously with a push of the button. As a result, hundreds of research hours spent combing through a traditional archive are reduced to a few moments. And yet, when I began to test the archive in class and to work with people from the Eastern band of the Cherokee Indians on the reservations just a hundred miles north of UGA, a whole new set of perplexing questions and unanticipated problems arose.

A year after its completion, I decided to use the SENAD archive as a “textbook” for my Multicultural American Literature class in the English department at UGA. That same semester, I invited a gifted Cherokee storyteller, Freeman Owle, to visit the class.¹¹ This unusual juxtaposition of what might be called digital and traditional storytelling proved to be both fascinating and humbling. The students were riveted by Freeman Owle’s performance. In sharp contrast, they found the history digitized in the archive difficult to use, in large part because no interpretive context existed to unknot the intricacies of the multistranded story encompassed by the archive. Unfortunately, no quantitative analysis had been written into the grant proposal. Anecdotal evidence, however, can serve to initiate a discussion about the problems left out or else unwittingly encoded into the SENAD archive, resulting in the students’ marked preference for the ancient charms of the oral tradition over the modern wonders of digital technology.

Given more than five years of hindsight, the origins of these problems have become somewhat clearer. For all of digital technology’s speed and seemingly unlimited capacity for “memory,” I believe dimensions of Native Americans’ gift for communal memory have not yet been adequately theorized or translated into XML

11. Freeman Owle is an Elder-in-Residence at Western Carolina University. His stories can be found in print form in *Living Stories of the Cherokee*, ed. Barbara R. Duncan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

codes, metadata, or Library of Congress standards.¹² Perhaps a specific example from one of Freeman Owle's stories will serve better than impersonal, theoretical jargon to illustrate how digital archives might be constructed to represent more accurately the culture(s) of their content.

When Freeman Owle spoke to my class he told a story about how the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians had recently purchased one of the tribe's most sacred sites, the Kituhwa Mound.¹³ Freeman explained the meaning of the place in relation to ancient stories that told how this mound protected the sacred fire, which defined the Cherokee as a distinct people. His stories connected the ancient past with the living present using what we would call myths, histories, and prophecies, although in Freeman's version of the story, no such distinctions were made—it was all history as related by that remarkable technology known as “oral tradition.”¹⁴ The students learned from the glimmer in Freeman's eyes and the confident tone of his voice that Kituhwa was a magical place, far more important and sacred than any photograph of a low-lying mound in a farmer's field could ever convey. He recounted how the Creator chose Kituhwa as the place where the Cherokee were presented with the laws of the tribe, explaining that the Cherokee still refer to themselves as “Ani-Kituhwa” (“people of Kituhwa”) on ceremonial occasions.

Following Freeman Owle's visit, I tried to use the SENAD site to further research the Kituhwa Mound, only to be informed by the state-of-the-art search engine that: “your basic search for ‘Kituhwa’ produced no results.” The keyword “mound” called up several documents related to surveying Cherokee and Creek lands as part of the removal process. The only result that suggested a deeper history and a sense of the sacred nature of the mounds to the indigenous people of the southeast was entitled “The Progress of the Human Mind from Rudeness to Refinement Exemplified in an Account of the Methods Pursued by Col. Benjamin Hawkins to Civilize

12. For a theoretical and political analysis of digital taxonomies, see Richard Rogers, *Information Politics on the Web* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); David Weinberger, *Everything Is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Order* (New York: Times Book, 2007). For a discussion of the relationship between digitization and Native American culture, see Mark Christal, Lorie Roy, Antony Cherian, “Stories Told: Tribal Communities and the Development of Virtual Museums,” in *Collaborative Access to Virtual Museum Collection Information: Seeing Through the Walls*, ed. Bernadette G. Callery (Binghamton: Haworth Information Press, 2004).

13. For digital video of Freeman Owle's stories, see “Native/American Digital Storytelling: Situating the Cherokee Oral Tradition within American Literary History,” text by Timothy B. Powell, storytelling by Freeman Owle, digital technology by William Weems, *Literature Compass*, v. 4:1 (2007).

14. My understanding of the remarkable sophistication of the oral tradition has been influenced by N. Scott Momaday, *Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); *Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature*, ed. Brian Swann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Dell Hymes, “In Vain I Tried to Tell You”: *Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

Certain Tribes of Savages,” written by Samuel L. Mitchill and published in *American Monthly Magazine* (September 1818):

The subjects of this philanthropic and instructive experiment were the Creeks and Cherokees. The former of these nations of Indians came from the west of the Mississippi. There is a tradition among them, that there are in the forks of the Red River, two mounds of earth ...¹⁵

From a Native American perspective, this document could be interpreted as the trace of a much older origin myth, covered over by a patina of racist discourse about “Tribes of Savages,” thinly veiled by the rhetoric of “philanthropic ... experiment.” And yet this deeper story, which would have been of primary importance to a member of Creek society, is almost completely erased by prejudices encoded in the language of the article. The writer, for example, passes over this reference to an ancient, sacred site with the observation that “The [Creek] War [of] 1814 led the inhabitants of Tennessee and Georgia, to destroy, in their own defense, a considerable part of the Creek Nation,” an action described in the following paragraph as “exterminating warfare.” For my students in Georgia, where there are no Native American reservations and memories of the Trail of Tears still haunt the red soil, the lack of any interpretive context for such documents unintentionally reinforces what many Native scholars have called the “myth of the Vanishing Indian.”

As one might imagine, the problem became more acute when I approached the Cherokee to gauge their reaction to the SENAD archive. In 2002, I began working with T. J. Holland, the curator of the Junaluska Museum on the Snowbird reservation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians (EBCI) in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. We worked together for several years on a project designed to make the SENAD archive more accessible to Cherokee students and the local community. Long discussions with both elders and young people revealed persistent problems that effectively limited SENAD’s usefulness to the Cherokee with whom I spoke. Again, difficulties ensued from the lack of interpretive context. The sheer size of the archive, which had been a selling point with the IMLS, proved off-putting to those trying to make use of it. I thus found myself confronted with the unexpected and thoroughly disappointing realization that the archive alienated the very people, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, whose history “we” had set out to honor and make more accessible.

15. *Southeastern Native American Documents*, Digital Library of Georgia, document (PAM011), <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu>.

The dilemma did not occur, it is important to note, from a lack of attention to cultural issues. As the collaborative creators of the archive explain in a section entitled, “Issues of Cultural Sensitivity,”

The metadata (descriptive information) that accompanies each document includes a summary of its contents. Every summary briefly situates the document within the context of the historical moment in which it was created. Care has been taken to maintain a neutral tone even when that of the document itself is highly partisan.¹⁶

These very brief summaries do not, however, succeed in situating “the document within the context of the historical moment,” in part because the library at that time did not see “historical interpretation” as part of its mission. Deeper problems, however, also need to be considered. Ironically, the problem does not stem solely from the “partisan” voice of many of the archive’s documents, but rather from the concerted effort “to maintain a neutral tone” in the writing of metadata. Let me stress that this is not the fault of the programmer or archivist; these structures are in many cases established by the Library of Congress cataloguing standards and thus so deeply entrenched that the strictures are rarely, if ever, discussed by the people applying the tags, writing the metadata, or assigning the subject headings. The reason the ethnocentrism remains hidden stems from a *collective faith* that the codes underlying the content—the all-but-invisible architecture behind the interface—constitute a culturally “neutral” taxonomy. (Please note that the term “collective,” in the preceding sentence, does not include the Native people whose culture is being analyzed!)¹⁷

In order to explicate and, hopefully, to correct these deeply embedded problems, it is necessary to draw on a wider array of resources both inside and outside the university’s walls. Because the University of Georgia Library (in 2001) was adamant that interpretive material not be included in the archive, these issues fell outside the official parameters established for the programmers and Native American studies scholars involved with the project and thus were not analyzed carefully or systematically. With the arrival of Toby Graham as the Head of the Digital Library of Georgia (DLG) in 2003, however, the DLG changed its policy and is now engaged in a remarkable project entitled the “Civil Rights Digital Library Initiative” that more fully and effectively integrates humanities scholarship with digital technology.¹⁸

16. “Issues of Cultural Sensitivity,” *Southeastern Native American Documents*, Digital Library of Georgia, <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu>.

17. My understanding of these issues has benefited from George Gregory Chester, *Proposed Tribal College Cataloging Systems: From Isolation to Association*, PhD diss., University of Minnesota (2006).

18. For more on the “Civil Rights Digital Library Initiative,” Digital Library of Georgia, www.usg.edu/galileo/about/planning/projects/crdll/.

In the spirit of a more interdisciplinary approach to the creation of digital archives, I want to utilize a critique from cultural studies to enliven the discussion about taxonomies used to catalog Native American culture. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*, a poignant overview highly regarded by many Native scholars, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes:

The cultural archive did not embody a unitary system of knowledge but should be conceived of as containing multiple traditions of knowledge and ways of knowing. Some knowledges are more dominant than others, some are submerged.¹⁹

Tuhiwai Smith is speaking of traditional archives, whose origins in many cases date back to the era of imperial conquest. Her point applies equally well to digital archives, although it is important to theorize carefully the historical specificity of traditional vs. digital archives. Whereas the colonial epistemologies that structure older, print-culture archives have been thoroughly and trenchantly documented, the relationship between colonization and digitization remains not only less analyzed but, perhaps, less applicable given that the two historical moments are more distant. Nevertheless, the question warrants careful consideration, especially in light of Native American culture's legal standing as "dependent, domestic nations," a peculiar status that raises the question of whether there ever has been a "post-colonial" moment for Native people in the United States.²⁰ Because digital technology is often, rightly or wrongly, construed as a "postmodern" phenomenon, the tendency is to view this newer form of archives as "embody[ing] a unitary system of knowledge." Thus far, a rigorous interrogation of the relationship between culture and digital technology has not yet occurred at this early stage of the digital revolution—necessitating further investigation into the question of whether an archive designed by the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians would have a fundamentally different epistemological architecture.²¹

What Tuhiwai Smith refers to as the "multiple traditions of knowledge" is even more clearly seen in the UGA students' and Cherokee viewers' reaction to the deep architecture of the SENAD site. To return to "The Progress of the Human Mind from Rudeness to Refinement" for a moment, this decidedly "partisan" document is described

19. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 43.

20. The phrase "dependent domestic nations" comes from Chief Justice John Marshall's ruling in *Cherokee v. Georgia*, 1831. For a fuller analysis of the legal implications of the term, see Robert A. Williams, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourse of Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

21. I have discussed this issue at greater length in Timothy B. Powell, "Digitizing Cherokee Culture: Libraries, Students and the Reservation," *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 30:2 (2005): 79–98.

by the following subject headings: “Cherokee Indians,” “Creek Indians,” “Hawkins, Benjamin, 1754–1816,” “Southern States,” “Writings.” On the surface, such familiar categories do indeed appear to be culturally “neutral” and to recognize distinct Native American forms of identity. The category of “Writings,” however, reveals the ethnocentrism inherent in the taxonomy. As Walter D. Mignolo effectively demonstrates in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, the association between alphabetic forms of “writing” and “history” as a “universal frame for understanding different cultural traditions” has systematically disregarded the indigenous symbolic systems’ ability to record accurately tribal histories and, hence, has fundamentally distorted the cultural complexity of “American history.”²²

More specifically, it may prove productive to pose the question of how the content and taxonomies of the SENAD archive might be redefined if the architecture of the site acknowledged the fact that the Cherokee possess a highly sophisticated form of “Writing” that does not appear under this heading or, indeed, anywhere in the archive. As Tuhiwai Smith observes, “indigenous peoples and their societies were [/ are] coded into the Western system of knowledge.”²³ How far in the future, one might wonder, is the day when university-constructed archives will utilize “Tsalagi” (the term the tribe uses to designate their identity) or, even better, to represent the word in the syllabary invented by Sequoya?

Lessons Learned a New Way

The goal of the *Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* digital archive is to build upon knowledge gained from the SENAD project—both the successes as well as the unforeseen problems—to create a “living” museum that contains not only historical documents, photographs, and artifacts, but also digital video recordings of members of contemporary Ojibwe communities whose traditional and contemporary knowledge will help to “awaken” the archival material through the art of storytelling. On a more theoretical level, this granting of authority to Ojibwe people to create their own taxonomies for their own history represents a significant step toward recognizing the sovereignty of Ojibwe epistemology. Which is to say, the larger “*Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* (‘To Sanction, To Give Authority, To Bring to Life’)” project devotes itself to utilizing Ojibwe language, stories, and knowledge to shape the tags, codes, and metadata that constitutes the digital architecture of the site.

Perhaps the most efficient and efficacious way to summarize a large and unfinished project is to take one specific example. On his visit to the Penn Museum in January of 2007, Larry Aitken interacted with a drum in a complex manner, the dynamics

22. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 95.

23. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

of which helped shape a prototype of the *Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* digital archive, “A Drum Speaks” (<http://www.boozhoo.net>). The drum was selected for display by Aitken’s colleague at Itasca Community College, Harold Annette, a drum keeper from the White Earth band of the Ojibwe. Annette is an innovative administrator who helped invent an extraordinarily successful Quiz Bowl competition that teaches Ojibwe language and culture to students in 21 high schools across the state of Minnesota. The interaction between Aitken and the drum was recorded as a digital video by David McDonald, the lead videographer of DMcD Productions and an invaluable partner in the project, who came with Aitken to Penn with the intent of creating a short film that could be used as a “text” for the students to study in future Quiz Bowls. Because Aitken directed his comments not only to the museum staff and Native American students present at the recording session, but also to Ojibwe teachers and students back home in northern Minnesota, his relationship to the drum took on a much deeper resonance.

Prior to viewing the drum, Aitken had performed a Sacred Pipe Ceremony in the courtyard of the Penn Museum. This ceremony “awakened these objects, which have been sleeping, lying dormant, awaiting someone who knew how to bring them back to life.” Aitken began by picking up a drum, pronouncing the Ojibwe word, *dewe’igan*, and explaining: “All of these things have spirit ... When you hit the drum you awaken it. They say that the first sound ever, in the beginning, was the sound of the drum ... The heart beat of mother earth.” In sharp contrast with the “neutral tone” of the SENAD architecture that seeks to “situate the document within the context of the historical moment in which it was created,” it is clear that Aitken’s brief explanation of how the drum fits into “history” derives not from “a unitary system of knowledge” but from a distinctly Ojibwe epistemology or way of knowing the world. That is to say, *dewe’igan* refers not to a specific artifact, “collected” (or stolen) by a non-Native person, but rather to the drum’s role in creation stories. In the turn of a phrase, Aitken’s story transported his audience all the way back to the beginning of time, such that for those who were present in the room when he struck the drum one could actually hear “the first sound ever, in the beginning ... The heart beat of Mother Earth.”²⁴

Still stunned from having witnessed how Aitken unfolded the remarkable expanse of Ojibwe history, which defies the calibrations of chronological time, the staff then watched in awe as he picked up the drum once again and played a song he had been taught, while harvesting rice as a young boy, by an Ojibwe elder. Aitken later explained that the drum itself told him to pick it up and to play the song, which I believe did happen. Immediately thereafter, he placed tobacco down and said a

24. *Weweni* (“Be Careful”).

prayer to thank the drum for speaking and offering itself to be played. This extraordinary moment is a testimony not only to what can happen when a Native person invested with tribal authority comes into contact with artifacts in an academic museum, but also to the exciting new age—brought upon by the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed in 1990—when the curators and keepers of the Penn Museum will allow an Ojibwe person to pick up and play a drum from its collection. As Aitken notes in the video: “I’ve been to a lot of dead museums before, where they tell you ‘don’t touch!’ but this is the first time I’ve been to a living museum.”²⁵

This video of Aitken’s interaction with the drum, “*Weweni (Take Care)*,” subsequently took on something akin to a life of its own, “awakening” other forms of knowledge. When shown to David McKnight, the Head of the University of Pennsylvania Library’s Schoenberg Center for Electronic Texts and Images (SCETI), the idea arose to configure the *Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* digital archive according to traditional Ojibwe systems of knowledge. The video also inspired a successful grant application to the NEH to collaborate with Itasca Community College (ICC), White Earth Tribal and Community College (WETCC), and the University of Minnesota, Duluth. The highly innovative Co-Principle Investigators of the grant, Barbara McDonald (ICC) and Nyleta Belgarde (WETCC), have enlisted a gifted array of artists, tribal historians, language teachers, drum keepers, sacred pipe carriers, and administrators from Ojibwe country to act as an advisory board and to oversee the creation of taxonomies created from traditional Ojibwe knowledge systems. The showing of *Weweni* on the White Earth reservation, in turn, initiated an important series of conversations about which objects and stories will be made available to be shown in digital form and how permission givers from the community will be involved from the very outset of the project. The title, “Take Care,” remains at the forefront of everyone’s mind.

What has been particularly fascinating about recording oral histories describing these artifacts is the realization that digital technology seems to be a much better medium than print culture for capturing the fluidity, spontaneity, and multilayered quality of Ojibwe storytelling. As many humanities scholars have noticed in the past, the static quality of text-based analyses serves the oral tradition poorly in that it does not capture many important dimensions. In the case of Aitken’s dynamic relationship to the drum in *Weweni*, for example, merely quoting his speech cannot capture how his voice chokes up with emotion after singing the wild ricing song (just after the drum spoke to him). Not being able to hear the intonation of the Ojibwe word *dewe’igan* pronounced by a fluent speaker further points to the intellectual impoverishment of trying to write about this experience in the alphabetic form of the colonizer.

25. Ibid.

Rather than attempting to invent new taxonomies by endlessly discussing which categories should be created first, the project moves forward with the rhythms of the *dewe'igan* played in the present at the urging of the past. Progress, then, becomes a nonlinear adventure that unfolds in much the same way that the story-telling took place on the White Earth reservation. Harold Annette pointed out a bulrush mat in the video and wove a beautiful story about how his grandmother woke him up when the birds began singing, before dawn, to go down and pick the rushes so that they would be flexible with the morning dew. Andy Favorite, the tribal historian at White Earth, remembered how he used to dive down, “a couple of hundred pounds ago,” to cut the bulrushes for his grandmother to weave into mats. Sonny Peacock, the President of WETCC and an enrolled member of the Fond du Lac band, responded by recounting how these bulrush mats were hung on the walls of his family home as insulation against the northern Minnesota winters. Judy Fairbanks, a staff member at WETCC, then told how these mats continued to be made by women in the community.

We are still struggling together to determine how this living system of knowledge can be translated into digital codes. We have begun to understand that stories should be more important than categories, that indigenous systems like the colors associated with the cardinal points in Ojibwe cosmology should be employed instead of sidebars and drop-down menus. To the great credit of the Penn Museum and the Schoenberg Center's staff, we are all beginning to realize that the Ojibwe are the most qualified to create this new folksonomy, once the digital architecture has been put into place. And thus, the next grant applications will strive to create a future where the tagging and writing of metadata will be done by Ojibwe students on the reservations, teaching them a valuable skill for the new economy and, perhaps, creating a new generation of tribal historians.

**GALLAGHER
BOOKS**



Rare, Out of Print, Unusual Books

**1428 S. Broadway
Denver CO, 80210**

303.756.5821

Toll Free: 1-866.425.5225

Search our Inventory by Category at: www.gcbooks.com

Billing to Institutions

gallabks@gcbooks.com