The pressing need for decolonial methods in archaeology and archives

Muna Ali 1,2, Molly Kamph2, Torben Rick2, Joshua Bell2
1 Columbia University, Department of Anthropology
2 Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology

Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

---

**Complex Relationships: Archaeology, the Archive, and Indigenous Communities**

Archaeology has historically been done of Indigenous communities and not for them. Given the immutable nature of archaeological fieldwork mediums (photography, writing), the archive allows researchers to question narratives of the past. Such narratives have often been leveraged to dispossess Indigenous identity and communities.

---

**Archival Processing in Action: The Stanford and Jodry papers**

Given the destructive nature of archaeological work, photography (alongside maps and drawings) has been—and remains—a critical tool for archaeologists to document their work. Rehousing this material is a critical step in making the collection accessible for research.

Stanford and Jodry meticulously documented their fieldwork using film slides. Some of Stanford’s film slides, which depict excavations and specimens, came arranged in boxes such as the one depicted to the left. Through a process called rehousing, slides are moved from boxes to plastic sheets. If the box includes an organizational map, that information is also rehoused.

---

**The Archive’s Decolonial Potential**

How can archival research mitigate the impacts of harmful historical interactions between Indigenous communities and archaeologists?

SI Repatriation staff Dorothy Lippert and Terry Snowball collaborate directly with Indigenous communities. Programs like Recovering Voices at the Smithsonian help create opportunities for communities to tell their own stories by facilitating access to the National Anthropological Archives (NAA). Community subject guides and digitization by the NAA help make material more accessible for remote research.

A decolonized archive returns agency to Indigenous communities, helping to remedy historical dispossession.

---

**Unintended Consequences: The Solutrean Hypothesis**

Dennis Stanford and Bruce Bradley claimed the first peoples of the Western Hemisphere were “Solutrean peoples” from modern-day France. This hypothesis culminated in their book *Across Atlantic Ice: The Origin of America’s Clovis Culture* (2012). Untended consequences of this hypothesis have been its:

- Co-option by white supremacists to advance a racist agenda
- Dispossession of Indigenous histories

---

**Conclusion**

Anthropology and archaeology must come to terms with their controversial legacies and unintended consequences of their research. By actively centering Indigenous peoples as our partners in science, the archive can become a liberatory tool for Indigenous communities. Future work in the archives can transcend the controversies of the past and address silences in the historical record.

**Acknowledgements and References**

This research was made possible through funding from the Smithsonian Institution, NMNH. Additional thanks to the National Science Foundation, REU Site OCE-1560088.

Thank you to all who contributed their assistance to this project: Candace Greene, Terry Snowball, Dorothy Lippert, Lisa Carney, the Summer Institute for Museum Anthropology (SIMA), and Gina Rappaport. Thank you to Vanessa Gonzalez, Ioan Lascu, and Virginia Power for their invaluable advice and support.

Works Cited