Analyzing Photographs and Feedback from Native Community Visitors to the National Anthropological Archives

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Speaker 1: “One of the interesting things about this stuff is that there’s not a feminine perspective and so you see pictures that were taken by men, so women were kinda like a byproduct...” [The] publications, it’s written by men and they like to write about war societies.”

Speaker 2: “[They’re] not talking about our childrearing practices.”

- Two Apsaalooke Community Members

Background
Photography has been utilized by anthropologists throughout the discipline’s development. This has resulted in amazing photographic records of different cultures that can help anthropologists as well as descendants of the photographic subjects to track change, revitalize traditions, and honor past cultures and peoples (Pinney, 2011). Unfortunately, anthropology has not always been an ethical endeavor (Bruchac, 2018). While some anthropologists forged close relationships and were granted permission to make photographs, many 19th-century photographs of Native peoples were used as tourist trinkets or racist propaganda. Anthropologists and archives in concert with Indigenous communities and scholars are confronting these painful histories and realities. The National Anthropological Archives (NAA) has the responsibility of housing an estimated 1 million photographs made in these complex contexts.

Questions
In this project, using Information Please (IP) forms and footage from Recovering Voices community visits, I ask 1) what are the impacts of Native peoples’ encounters with photographic archival collections at the National Anthropological Archives? 2) What do corrections to historical photographic catalog records suggested by Indigenous community members tell us about how those collections represent or misrepresent Native knowledge or identity? 3) What do encounters with archival photographs tell us about the impact and meaning of these photos today?

1 Information please forms are forms filled out when the archival user has more information to add or a correction to make to an archival object. In theory these forms help facilitate updates to archival records and begin being used during the 1990’s.

2 Recovering Voices is a Smithsonian funded grant program through the National Museum of Natural History that aims to bring Native community members together with any material the Smithsonian has related to their culture. It hopes to share and save cultural knowledge and archival photographs tell us about the impact and meaning of these photos today.

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“I think that the Indians were, you know ... they describe them as stoic, so in a way they were. The warriors were taught to be fierce ... Indians were known to tease and joke and be silly, but ... they never show those scenes. ... The pictures of the Indians are of the mean, angry savage.”

-Apsaalooke Community Member

Methods
• Organized and analyzed 137 Information Please forms left by archival users; looked at the photography related IPs left by Native community members to see what corrections are being suggested.
• Analyzed 11 hours of unedited footage of Recovering Voices community member visits, Apsaalooke group (2016), Isle de Jean Charles group (2017), Cheyenne group (2015) Wasco group (2015), and Tlingit group (2017), while they viewed photographic collections at the NAA in order to discern how visitors engaged with photographs of their ancestors. These videos were shot with a stationary camera with a wide focus to document the visit for the IPs.

Results
• Of the 137 Information Please forms (IPs), half of the 18 IPs filled out by Native community members are for photographs. 9 of the 44 photography IPs were from Native community members, 40% of the total photography IPs. Of the remaining 91 IPs, unrelated to photographs, 9 were left by Native community members, only 9.8% of the total. 16% are left anonymous, so this data is likely skewed.

• Among the photograph IPs forms left by Native viewers:
  ○ Three identify an individual.
  ○ Three correct tribal affiliation.
  ○ Two correct location.
  ○ One describes what action is being done.

• Only three IPs were filled out during the 11 hours of video footage, despite an immense amount of comments made about the archival photographs.

• Common comments in the Recovering Voices footage include:
  ○ Photography’s culture or tribal affiliation are labelled inaccurately.
  ○ Insensitive labels.
  ○ Photographs of ceremonial practices were either taken without permission or should not be viewed by anyone except people from that tribe.
  ○ There is not enough time for them to go through everything.

• The lack of use of IPs is a missed opportunity to add more information to the archival records, but the IPs that exist are not dealt with promptly. Current unresolved IPs date back to 2013, with a few outliers in 2020.

Methodology

Reading from the back of a photograph, “And they say the Indian boys have been at school, […] but we see the improvement … the Indians decrease with the increase of civilization, and when they will be perfectly civilized they will be all good Indians.”

-Apsaalooke Community Member

Discussion
“Look at this it says that it was Apache, but this is a Pueblo girl.” Apsaalooke community member remarks and an archival starts to write an IP. Once someone begins filling out the IP for them, they become more passive in making their correction, with statements such as, “I wouldn’t say that,” “it’s questionable” in regards to tribal affiliation of the girl in the photos.

• A photograph’s meaning is determined by the relationship between the subject and viewers’ context (Edwards, 2001). Viewing photographs often objectifies the subject (Edwards, 2012). It is likely that stereotypes and biases towards Native Americans, some of which were formed using these photographs as propaganda, might not be recognized by a non-Native viewer (Denzin et al., 2008).

• Possible reasons for IP forms not commonly being filled out by tribal members could have to do with the underlying historical and social relationship between archives, museums, and Native communities. IPs can also put an unfair pressure on Native viewers to become a knowledge bearer for the archives.

• The NAA does not have the funding or personnel to take care of the IP forms in an efficient manner, leading to the backlog of IPs.

Future Directions
• While archives have made efforts to engage community needs through and respond to the Protocols for Native Archival Access, there is a lot of work to be done. 1 At the NMNH, the work of Repatriation, Arctic Studies, and Recovering Voices is an important step in the right direction.

• What is needed is expanding the efforts of these programs to bring in communities to the archives longer amount of time. A person is needed who is dedicated to the processing and ingesting of the information generated during these visits to the NAA’s archives. This needs to be done in a way that maintains the history of these archives but opens up spaces for new voices and perspectives.

• Hiring Native archivists will not only help staff the NAA, it will help alleviate the separation between the archive and Native communities.

• IPs provide an important opportunity to enhance archival records. The process of documenting this knowledge needs to expanded to help handle, catalog, and/or restrict collections in an appropriate manner.

1 Formally endorsed by the Society of American Archivists in 2018, but in use at the NAA since 2007