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Project Naming: Decolonizing Archival Practices at Library and Archives Canada

Reflecting on twenty years in revising archival descriptions and making them culturally sensitive.

"When archivists and their institutions acknowledge the marginalization or absence of the oppressed, they must respond through establishing a reparative archive that engenders inclusivity. Reparative archival work does not pretend to ignore the imperialist, racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist, and other discriminatory traditions of mainstream archives … [it] is an ethical imperative for all within traditional archival spaces."

This quote by Lae'l Hughes-Watkins describes the necessity and the ethics of decolonizing archival practices. These are the principles behind Project Naming, a photo identification and community engagement initiative at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). In this article, I will give an overview of the project and its impact on decolonization work at LAC.

I began working at the National Archives of Canada (now LAC) in June 2003 in Online Content, the team responsible for creating web exhibitions. Among my earliest projects, and one of the most impactful and long-lasting initiatives at LAC, was Project Naming. It began as a partnership between an Ottawa-based post-secondary program for Inuit students called Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS), the Government of Nunavut and LAC. I had the privilege to lead this project from 2003 to 2017.

During its first decade, Project Naming focused on images of Nunavummiut (people from the territory of Nunavut). Now in its twenty-second year, it has since expanded nationally to include First Nations, Inuit from all four Arctic regions—Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut—and the Métis Nation.

From an intergenerational project...

As the federal archive, LAC holds thousands of photographs portraying Indigenous Peoples—First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation. Most were taken by non-Indigenous federal government employees and private photographers. Filtered through a Eurocentric lens, these photographs were largely taken for non-Indigenous audiences. While some photographers attempted to identify the individuals captured in the images, the majority of subjects either were never named or were described in ethnographic or pejorative language. An early example of a photograph identified through Project Naming is this image of Tuurnagaaluk, who was married to Arnatsiaq and whose daughter was Juunaisi. There is no accompanying information in the album about the small chalkboards with the three consecutive numbers. It is likely their photographs were taken as a way to identify the family members, whose Inuktitut names See Inuit Disc Numbers | The Canadian Encyclopedia for information about the history of various identification systems used by the Canadian government would have been challenging for government officials to record.

The early years of Project Naming emphasized an intergenerational approach. Using archival images as conversation starters, Inuit youth met with Elders in their communities to learn about their rich histories. Elders were asked to identify the people whose identities had been anonymous for decades. NS shared their names with me, often including familial information. I added this information to the title or the “additional notes” field in the archival record. To thank community members for their generosity in sharing their knowledge, I made high resolution prints of the archival photographs for the families.

Curtis Kuunaq and Elder Martha Otokala Okotaq

... and revising descriptions of archival records...

While the revision of archival records sounds routine, the addition of Indigenous names, communities and other relevant information to the database represented a significant shift in the way that a colonial institution like LAC approached its archival descriptions. Significantly, this was one of the first initiatives at LAC to revise existing records or create new archival records with information provided by members of the public.

From its inception, Project Naming has countered the dominant narrative through the restoration of the names of Indigenous Peoples. This work laid the foundation for the creation of culturally respectful and inclusive archival descriptions in We Are Here: Sharing Stories (WAHSS).

The first phase of WAHSS (2018–2021) involved the digitization of nearly 600,000 archival records from media, newspapers and rare books with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation content. The selection was led by three Indigenous researchers, two First Nations and one Inuk, who also verified the current names of the people, communities and material culture for the archival descriptions. Early on, it became evident a new policy was needed on creating archival descriptions for Indigenous content. Nearly a year in development, Titles for descriptions of Indigenous-related archival content was released by LAC in October 2018. Following the rules for archival descriptions and the flexibility they allow, new information was added to the title fields in square brackets, followed by existing original titles. The retention of the original title was important in recognizing, but not prioritizing, colonialist attitudes. This 1866 watercolour depicting a Kanienhkenha:ka woman is among the hundreds of records using inclusive and respectful language while retaining the original caption.

Change is never easy, yet Project Naming has shown there is space in archival descriptions for the inclusion of narratives outside the dominant discourse. It is about reparation by addressing power imbalances and giving voice to those who have been omitted from the historical record or have been inaccurately portrayed. Creating culturally sensitive archival descriptions is challenging but essential for honouring truth and contributing to reconciliation efforts identified in the 94 calls to action by the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

At its core, decolonizing archival practices requires the knowledge and expertise of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation staff and communities. Through the restoration of names, Project Naming gives voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether. Decolonization work at LAC is an ongoing process and is continues to develop. Progress on this critical work is monitored on Library and Archives Canada's Guiding Principles to Reconciliation and Indigenous Rights and the Indigenous Heritage Action Plan Implementation Progress Report (canada.ca).

Further links and resources

Derrière chaque image, une histoire, https://filmssanajik.com/projet/derriere-chaque-image-une-histoire/ (20.04.2024).

Greenhorn, Beth: “Project Naming: reconnecting Indigenous communities with their histories through archival photographs,” in Edward Benoit III, Alexandra Eveleigh (eds.): *Participatory Archives: Theory and Practice*, London (UK): Facet Publishing, 2019, pp. 45–57.

Greenhorn, Beth: Re-presenting Archival and Library Collections through the Voices and Languages of First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation in an Interactive Ebook, Arctic Studies Center Newsletter, no. 29, May 2022, pp. 54–56.

Payne, Carol, Beth Greenhorn, Deborah Kigjugalik Webster and Christina Williamson (eds.): *Atiqput: Inuit Oral History and Project Naming*, Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2022.

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25 years of experience of doing primary and secondary research with a education background of Art History.

Working towards the decolonization of policies and practices involving Indigenous colleagues, community partners and broader communities in the last two decades at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). As a motivational team leader in this context, worked on a wide variety of virtual and physical exhibitions, social media campaigns, and most recently an interactive eBook.

Abstract

Deutsch
Das Projekt zur Identifizierung von Inuit-Fotos der Nunavut wurde 2003 im Rahmen einer Partnerschaft zwischen der kanadischen Bibliothek und dem kanadischen Archiv, der Regierung von Nunavut und Inuit-Studenten ins Leben gerufen.

Nach zehn Jahren wurde die Initiative auf alle indigenen Völker Kanadas und die Métis sowie auf andere Quellen (Bücher, Zeitungen, audiovisuelle Medien) ausgeweitet. Die Beschreibungsregeln reichen von der Hinzufügung einfacher Kommentare über eine systematische Überarbeitung der Titelfelder mit Blick auf Namen von Personen, Handlungen und Standorten bis hin zur Entwicklung von Erschliessungsrichtlinien.

Das Projekt erinnert daran, dass es nicht darum geht, eine vergangene Erschliessungspraxis aufzuheben, sondern dass die verschiedenen kulturellen Einflussfaktoren auf diese Praxis anerkannt und dokumentiert werden müssen. Der Artikel nennt mehrere Beispiele und verweist auf verschiedene ergänzende Quellen.

Français
Le projet d'identification de photos d'inuits du Nunavut a été initié en 2003 grâce à un partenariat entre Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, le gouvernement de Nunavut et des étudiants Inuit.

Au bout de 10 ans, l'initiative s'est étendue à l'ensemble des peuples autochtones du Canada et à la Nation métisse, ainsi qu'à d'autres sources (ouvrages, journaux, médias audiovisuels). Les règles de description sont passées de l'ajout de simples notes fournies sur les noms de personnes, d'actions et de lieux à la mise à jour systématique des champs titres, en respectant des directives développées progressivement.

Ce projet rappelle qu'il ne s'agit pas de supprimer, mais de reconnaître l'évolution des pratiques en montrant deux facettes de l'approche de la description archivistique influencée par des comportements culturels. L'article donne plusieurs exemples et renvoie à différentes ressources complémentaires.