

The pressing need for decolonial methods in archaeology and archives



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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.



Muna Ali in the National Anthropological Archives (NAA) processing room, looking at rehoused slides from the Stanford and Jodry papers

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.

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.



Box of film slides from the Thunderbird site in Tennessee (site code 44WR11)

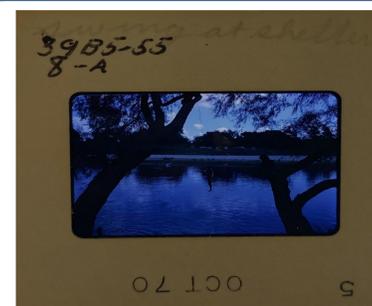
Some of Stanford's film slides, which depict excavations and specimens, came arranged in boxes such as the one depicted to the left. Through a process called rehousing, slides are moved from boxes to plastic sheets. If the box includes an organizational map, that information is also rehoused.

I took each individual slide from the box and placed them into their own plastic sleeve. Slides often include site codes, which allows for the archaeological site to be easily identified. Illuminating film slides using a light tray produces a more clearly visible image.



Sheet of rehoused film slides given to Dennis Stanford from Al Redder

Once the entire box is rehoused, each sheet is moved into a binder in numeric order. These rehoused slides will then enter the archive for researcher use. This summer, I rehoused 3,007 film slides from the Stanford and Jodry papers.



Single film slide from a site in South Dakota (site code 39B5-55), taken October 1970 ("Oct 70")

Each sheet holds twenty slides, individually housed in their own sleeve. I labeled and numbered each sheet, maintaining the box's original order.

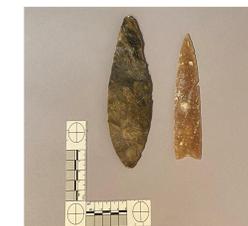


Binder of a fully rehoused film slide box

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). Unintended consequences of this hypothesis have been its:

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



Solutrean point (left) positioned next to a Clovis point cast (right)

A1926 and cast of Drake cache point, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

Can notes, slides and other materials from the archives offer a new approach?

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.

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