

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

“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

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

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.



Nawat (Left Hand), Arapaho, 1872
BAE GN 00136 06093200, National Anthropological Archives.

Methodologies

- 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 community members.
- Compared what is being said in the videos with what is being written down in IPs, and analyzed what is being done with the information shared by the Recovering Voices Community Visits the archives.
- Observed a community visit, Spokane group (2019), in order to better understand the relationship between Native groups and the NAA.



Unidentified Artisans, Hopi.
INV 09909300. Photo Lot 90-1, George V. Allen Collection of American Indian Stereographs, National Anthropological Archives.

Discussion

“Look at this it says that it was Apache, but this is a Pueblo girl,” Apsaalooke community member remarks and an archivist 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 photo.

- 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).
- The NAA has a responsibility as a federally funded institution and the keepers of vast amounts of cultural knowledge to make the archives culturally relevant and accessible. If “museums become a temple for the society that sustains it,” (Ames, 1992), what kind of society is being upheld when images are misidentified and or not properly contextualized?
- 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.



Unidentified Woman and Child, Taos. 1877.
BAE GN 01936 06330400, National Anthropological Archives.

Questions

In this project, using Information Please (IP) forms¹ and footage from Recovering Voices² 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 these 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 document. In theory these forms help facilitate updates to archival records and began 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 materials the Smithsonian has related to their culture. It hopes to share and save cultural knowledge and languages between institutions and Native communities. See: <https://naturalhistory.si.edu/research/anthropology/programs/recovering-voices>



Aru-saw-la-kit-towy (A Fine Horse), La-roo-chuk-a-la-shar (Sun Chief), Ski-ar-ra-ra-shar (Lone Chief), Se-ted-e-row-weet (One Aimed At), Cot-ra-ra-tet-goots (Struck with an Tomahawk). Pawnee. ND. SPC 010020.04. Photo Lot 4420, William Henry Jackson Albums, National Anthropological Archives.

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, 20.4% 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:
 - Photograph’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 2009.



Wild Bill, Walla Walla. 1900.
BAE GN 02902B24 06467700, National Anthropological Archives.

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Future Directions

- While archives have made efforts to engage community needs through and respond to the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials there is a lot of work to be done. ¹ At the NMNH, the work of Repatriation Department, Arctic Studies, and Recovering Voices are important steps in the right direction.
- What is needed is expanding the efforts of these programs to bring in communities to the archives longer amounts 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 be 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



Sally Shuster, Sahaptin. 1900.
BAE GN 02880C10 06459000, National Anthropological Archives.