Reparative Description in 'Project Naming': Toward an Anti-Colonial Practice

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Introduction

In its most ideal form, archiving involves the preservation of objects so that they may continue to be accessible in the future. The reality is that, as these objects enter institutional collections, they are often valued less for their unique qualities than for their cumulative effect, as archivists attempt to contextualize them as part of a larger, cohesive collection. Materials are typically grouped by creator or donor, or by a vague thematic link. This organizational structure can pose various challenges for those seeking to find a specific object within the archive. The context provided by the creator or donor becomes essential to a collection's initial description, but due to the time constraints of the acquisition process, assessing each individual object is not always possible. Often, descriptions of archival objects can also be inconsistent—partly because of the prevalent turnover of short-term labour—and as a result, the information being sought after might be obfuscated or was never fully elaborated. While the archive is established as a space that safeguards history through its custody of unique objects, these un(der)described materials often remain inaccessible.

Archives must often find a balance between enhancing descriptions of the objects already within their collections for improved public access and expanding the scope of their collections by seeking out other objects that fit within their mandate. This often results in a backlog of objects, at risk of neglect and obscurity, which need to be more thoroughly documented and researched for their cultural specificity or uniqueness. This work may involve reassessing objects that have been described using outdated, inappropriate, or outright offensive language, resulting in descriptions that may have represented the intentions of a creator or donor but that also misrepresent the people or culture depicted therein. In this article, I argue that reparative description can effectively address these issues by expanding the kinds of knowledge

and information that is recorded to make objects more discoverable, creating more nuanced understandings of materials and histories that have been overlooked, and acknowledging the impact of bias in archival description. As I suggest, this work runs parallel to the physical repatriation of cultural artifacts. The practice of reparative description can not only change how archival objects are understood and interpreted culturally; it can also help acknowledge the role of the researchers and archivists whose perspectives and labour shape that interpretation. In the conclusion of this article, I reflect on how the conditions of short-term contract labour hampers this work, relating my own experiences as an archival intern.

Ann Laura Stoler describes the condition of "ruin" as an unsettling of imperial attributes. Ruins are the sites of reflection through which processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation can be unpacked. While Stoler reflects on cultural heritage sites broadly, she acknowledges the specific possibilities of the archive as a site for reflection. As she argues, "Colonialisms have been predicated on guarding the natural and cultural patrimonies for populations assumed to need guidance in how to value and preserve them" (2008, 198). To "unsettle" this position, we must recognize the ways in which archives have upheld and maintained biases and challenge the systems of hierarchy that determine the importance and value of a cultural object. In other words, the descriptions of these objects should reflect how they are recognized and understood by those communities so that these objects remain identifiable for them.

In this article, I present the successes of Library and Archives Canada's "Project Naming" as a case study to discuss how the archive can be mobilized beyond its physical space and how the colonial object can be reconnected to its cultural milieu. This case study reiterates the responsibility of archives as custodians and shows how pathways for intergenerational knowledge exchange can be created. While archives are trusted facilitators of history, they do not represent the only, nor always the most relevant, perspective. This article explores the use of reparative description practices within an institutional collection with the aims of expanding and democratizing our understanding of "cultural heritage." In Canada, the concept of cultural heritage was codified through the Multiculturalism Act of 1988—the first of its kind—which former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau claimed was the best way of "assuring cultural freedom" (Berry 2020). The act officially mandated that the government protect Canada's cultural diversity, but, as this article makes clear, preserving images of Inuit communities within the archive, and describing them using colonial terms, does not assure the cultural freedom of the Inuit.

Project Naming

Initiated by Murray Angus, an instructor at Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS), an Inuit college program in Ottawa, Project Naming was conceived in 2001 as a collaboration between NS and the National Archives to re-examine images representing Inuit communities created by explorers and ethnographers who deposited their materials with the archive (Library and Archives Canada 2005a). These materials perpetuate colonial ideology since they were created as documentation of "peripheral" commu-

nities perceived to be "on the verge of extinction," but neglected to provide relevant information which could be used to help identify the individuals in the photographs. The images used in Project Naming were part of a broader collection, "Photographs from the North." As senior project manager Beth Greenhorn describes:

> The Canadian North has fascinated and inspired generations of photographers from the South since the latter half of the 19th century. Drawn by the austere beauty of the Arctic and the people from this region, they captured images that provide a visual legacy and link to the past. Navy personnel and topographers on Arctic expeditions were among the first photographers to document the people and the landscape of the Northwest Territories, or what is now Nunavut. (Greenhorn 2005)

Ariella Azoulay (2019, 10–11) explains that to unlearn imperialism we must aspire to be there for and with those who are targeted by imperial violence, and that we must understand that the photographic record is not neutral, but intentionally framed to structure historical narratives from the perspective of the documenter, perpetuating imperial violence as visual evidence. For Azoulay, engaging with the subjects of these captured moments is part of "unlearning." Unlearning means working with those with embodied knowledge, which may have been passed down through generations, to expand the information represented in the archival record. Ultimately, responsible custodians of these objects must engage in this practice, or risk perpetrating imperial violence through erasure.

While the photographs preserved in the archive may be significant to the institution because of their historical representations of the Inuit, we need to acknowledge their simultaneous erasure of Inuit identity and specificity. When creators, donors, or archivists have failed to document or record this important information, the embodied knowledge of the communities represented can help us recover information to make the archive more discoverable and accessible. Archivists cannot recover this information on their own but need to engage and collaborate with these communities to learn from their lived experience. Specifically in the case of Project Naming, it was crucial for the process to involve Inuit youth in order to expand on how embodied knowledge can be understood. They were able to connect more deeply to their cultural heritage, while archivists were able to better describe the collections of Inuit photographs held by Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

Before the project officially launched in 2004, the descriptions of the photographs were quite limited: the only notable pieces of information provided by the photographers were the locations of the images and the dates they were captured; though several of these photographs featured Inuit communities, they were only recorded as "unknown" individuals. Although Inuit peoples could be visibly seen in the archive, prior to Project Naming, information about these historical representations was scarce.

There are two distinct moments over the course of the project's evolution which signify how this project can serve as an example of an archive's reparative ac-

tion in order to better reflect and engage with the communities that it seeks to represent. The project began modestly with the digitization of 500 photographs from the Richard Harrington fonds (Library and Archives Canada 2005a). Harrington was an explorer based in Toronto who travelled North to photograph Inuit communities in the 1940s and 1950s. Based on Harrington's documentation of where he visited, NS students from several communities—Igloolik, Kugluktuk (formerly Coppermine), Taloyoak (formerly Spence Bay), and Padlei—were invited to search through Harrington's photos. The students then transferred the digitized images to CD-ROMs which they could bring home to share with Elders of their respective communities. Angus spoke about how connecting over these images overcame the language barriers between the students and the Elders, as the students did not speak Inuktitut and the Elders did not speak English (Library and Archives Canada 2005a). This not only resulted in students experiencing a deeper understanding of their heritage, but it was an opportunity for the Elders of the community to see photographs of their relatives for the first time.

It also proved successful for LAC, as over 75 percent of photographs received a positive identification (Curtis 2018, 52). As Louise Curtis notes, the digital copies were provided only with their file numbers and the names of the communities they depicted; since participants' responses were very close to the supplied titles used by the archive, this verified the accuracy of the new information and identifications (52). This process also caused the archivists to rethink the reliance on anglicized names to represent these communities: Greenhorn herself described how this project led her to question how the archive historically privileges Western information systems over Indigenous knowledge (53). Yet, the archivists do not simply replace or remove outdated language or inaccurate terms from the archival record. Instead, old descriptions are included in a new field to document and preserve the ways in which these objects have previously been contextualized and historicized. Meanwhile, the new information is recorded in the database by entering the names of people in the title field in square brackets, and their family history, living descendants, and other notes in the additional information field. Since these are all fields which could have several inputs, the accessibility and searchability of data is also enhanced (53).

After the success of these student-led identifications, Project Naming continued the investigation of other private and public image collections documenting other regions in Nunavut. Inuit Elders were invited to LAC for two weeks to research and select images, which were then digitized to be sent to Nunavut's Department for Culture, Language, Elders and Youth for further identification (Library and Archives Canada 2005a). The project also included community-based events in Ottawa where photographs were projected onto a screen and participants were invited to call out the names of people they could identify (Library and Archives Canada 2005b). As these were open community events, the LAC hoped it would encourage non-Indigenous members of the community to learn about the project, while showcasing its recent successes. Throughout, LAC recorded participants' comments to document the significance of this process. In 2002, during an event at LAC, participant Quluaq Pilikapsi made the following statement, translated into English for the project's

public website:

> It is . . . our future . . . all of our futures together. It is our focus…There are still people alive who have a lot of this information and they won't always be there. So in fact, there are things in storage [in buildings like Library and Archives Canada], but they are also in storage with people who are still alive [in the memories of the Elders]. This is something that has become very [important to] Quluaq because . . . our future, our *Sivuniksaut* [is connected to our past]. (Library and Archives Canada 2005b)

These events not only facilitated connections between participants and the archivists but also achieved the project's larger goals of revitalizing and grounding these communities' connection to their own histories by rediscovering their families and loved ones within the archives.

Project Naming initially focused on regions in Nunavut but, since expanding its online presence to social media platforms like Facebook and X, it has broadened to include images which were taken from all over the country, with most of them dating from the early twentieth century to the 1970s. It is estimated that since 2002, almost 10,000 images have been digitized, which has contributed to the positive identification of individuals and places equivalent to about 1 or 2 percent of the overall collection (Curtis 2018, 52). Even though the project no longer operates in a face-to-face capacity, online participation through social media has been crucial to maintain progress on identifying the photographs.

This project would not have been feasible without the participation of students and youth who wanted to learn more about their cultural heritage—something they typically did not discuss in their primary or secondary education—and the participation of the Elders, who were uniquely able to supply the necessary information. In fact, in their introduction to the Project Naming website, LAC acknowledges that identifying people in the photographs is time sensitive, as the Elders may be the last generation able to identify their relatives in these images (Library and Archives Canada 2005a). Were it not for their identifications, these collections would have continued to exist at the periphery of the archive, obscured by their lack of description. Instead, Project Naming gave identities back to individuals who would have otherwise been relegated to permanent anonymity, provided familial connection to those who had been searching for it, and offered points of reflection to the archivists and researchers who serve as custodians of this material.

Project Naming's attempts to make the LAC photographs more accessible can be considered a reparative act on two accounts. First, the archive attempted to bring awareness to the colonial biases that determined the description of these photographs—to acknowledge that the descriptions of most of these images recognized the land which was lived on rather than the people who inhabited it. Second, in its intergenerational approach to rectify these descriptive oversights and providing more thorough and appropriate context for these images, the project initiated a pedagogical relationship between the students, who are using recent digital technologies to

foster their connection to the past, and the Elders, who are able to pass on stories about their past and their cultural heritage. This method of sharing knowledge about these photographs is fostered by the custodians of the archive, who actively engaged with the community that the archive represents. In doing so, they acknowledged that what the archive might deem "historical" still has a very active connection to the present: contrary to Harrington's fictions of the Inuit, the people who lived on these lands have not disappeared. By acknowledging its biased position of power and incorporating descriptions provided by those who it is meant to represent, the archive moves toward the idealistic goal of "assuring cultural freedom."

Project Naming is far from the only archival effort to engage in collaborative description by inviting direct participation from communities. The British National Archives' online catalogue, Discovery, has tagging and transcription tools which help users crowdsource metadata to exist alongside the official descriptions. Curtis writes that, whether or not this material is integrated into the official descriptions, it fosters "positive cultural engagement" while building relationships with communities (2018, 53–54). Moreover, "the allowance of parallel information to co-exist with, and be linked to, the traditional finding aid begins the process of making space for those voices, whilst still keeping in place a standardized form of description—that helps users by enabling access across repositories" (54). A similar approach was taken by the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure project and the Polar Bear Expedition Finding Aid (54–55).

The Centre for the Study of Black Canadian Diaspora also centres its work around reparative description by engaging community members in collaborative cataloguing. During a course discussion on curation practices at Toronto Metropolitan University in 2023, co-founder Andrea Fatona described how galleries, libraries, archives, and museums canonize a particular colonial cultural ideology which creates hegemonic knowledge. Though history is preserved within these institutions, she questioned how the documentation of these objects reflects the process of legitimizing particular perspectives. As part of her work, she prioritizes discoverability and accessibility. Discoverability, she noted, is the process of searching through catalogues from various institutions to assess their holdings of Black representation. To "discover" them is to acknowledge that there are other perspectives outside the archive, which are informed by different approaches to a particular object or image. Accessibility means working with curators and researchers who can share their lived experiences to build fuller descriptions of these objects. As such, Fatona's project engages researchers in collaborative cataloguing practices to bring awareness to the positionality of Black diasporic perspectives, ultimately widening the scope of individuals' experiences of and responses to objects meant to be understood as collective "representations" of Black history. This practice of embodied knowledge fills in gaps of "undocumented" histories which may already be recorded in archival holdings. Additionally, the co-creation of metadata preserves historic terminology alongside new terms that would otherwise have been overlooked. Fatona describes this project as an effort to help people understand their respective cultural histories and expose the gaps in the documentation of non-European-American cultures.

As these other projects show, methods of repatriation and decolonization are not universal. Project Naming represents only one possibility for how these efforts might be achieved. Reading the testimonies of participants and those involved in the project reveals their deep understanding of the impact it has had on the Inuit community by bringing together those who are present and those who are in memory. The knowledge shared in the early stages of the project paved the way for its later, larger successes, including the archivists' reconsideration of what their role as custodians is in facilitating community connections and providing access to these materials, which are too often (dis)possessed under the guise of guardianship.

Archival Labour

In this concluding section, I want to reflect further on the role embodied knowledge plays in archival work by considering my own experiences as a budding archivist, and particularly my experience working with precarious images while simultaneously being a precarious worker. Conversations around representation are often centred around what is made visible through an image-based apparatus; less focus is afforded to that which remains out of frame. Writing about ethnographic cinema, Fatimah Tobing Rony describes how cinema "appears to bring the past and that which is culturally distant closer; likewise, anthropology, which posits that indigenous peoples are remnants of earlier ages, has been largely concerned with the description and preservation or reconstruction of the spatially and historically distant" (1996, 9). Her research on "ethnographic spectacle" is informed by an approach she dubs "the third eye," building on W. E. B. Dubois' notion of double consciousness, or the "internal splitting" caused by recognizing oneself as "Other" (4). I have learned to approach film preservation with a "third eye," recognizing how the technical apparatus itself was built on specific biases, including how most film stock was historically calibrated for white skin tones. Genevieve Yue writes compellingly about the "China Girl," the image of a (typically white) woman accompanied by a colour panel included at the beginning of most film prints as a control mechanism for colour and exposure. As Yue notes, "The name 'China Girl' and its variants circulate as part of laboratory vernacular and are only infrequently mentioned in the technical literature. As a result, it forms a kind of shadow history to the well-documented accounts of film stocks and the development of standardization methods for the film industry" (2015, 99). Though the China Girl only appeared as a brief footnote during a discussion about how to identify different film stocks as part of a class on film production processes, this discussion forever changed how I perceive and interact with film. It was at that moment that I realized that bias does not only surface as visual representation but is inherently embedded in the technical systems of film production and preservation.

This was further cemented when I spent a summer as an intern at the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, cataloguing donations acquired as part of the Sexual Representation Collection, the largest collection of adult film in Canada. One of the most extensive sub-collections I worked on, the Albert Steg fonds, included a range of films with personal comments written by the donor, which had to be maintained as part of the finding aid. I listed them under "keywords," but

often also elaborated on them in a miscellaneous notes field in the form of content warnings for potentially offensive material. As we had no prior discussion on how to integrate the donor's comments within the finding aid, I decided to format the finding aid in this way, preserving the donor's record while acknowledging his potentially offensive terms—such as stereotypical language used to describe racialized performers—to pre-emptively inform interested researchers of potentially offensive content. It was clear that the tone of these descriptions needed to be addressed within the finding aid, which I tried to do through the content warnings. This was a personal choice, as I experienced an array of feelings in putting this finding aid together because of my own experiences being subjected to similar fetishistic comments. However, the impact this had on my ability to assess the film material is not acknowledged anywhere in the record, other than in those content warnings.

The finding aid also notes that the information listed requires further verification and corroboration due to the limited amount of time given for the primary inspection. Here, I want to reflect on the persistent turnover caused by internships and short-term contracts, and the ways in which short-term labour challenges efforts toward reparative description. Short-term labour is common in most archives. Even the LAC, one of the largest archival institutions in the country, relies on the labour and knowledge of short-term workers—workers who are essential to processing the "backlog" of materials that cannot be managed by full-time archivists. When these short-term workers discover issues with descriptions or metadata for specific objects or collections, the constraints of their contracts may not allow them to address these issues properly themselves, and they may instead bring them up to full-time staff in the hope that they will investigate further. Frequent turnover also makes the need for consistent practices more acute, and the ability to develop long-term community relationships and trust more difficult. Whether or not these issues are addressed by full-time staff, the short-term workers' interactions with the material leave indelible marks, especially as they work to better inform the institution about materials that could be of potential interest.

In my training as an archivist, I had the pleasure of working with smaller archives, faced with interminable backlogs. In my work with these institutions, I was diligent in describing each object I worked with as fully and attentively as possible. I left each of those institutions with the sense that I had accomplished something. Yet, it is likely that if some of the research or work I did results in new research or discoveries, my labour will be described as the collective and anonymous effort of the institution. While it may not be possible to credit every archivist who helped process a collection, short-term workers' efforts to implement reparative description practices deserve to be acknowledged. Students and other precarious workers should be recognized for doing important work, whether that means being credited in the finding aid or more.

Project Naming is distinct in its decision to recognize both the archivists who cared for the materials and the community members who provided their insights and improved the archivists' understanding of the photographs. Providing access to the spaces where cataloguing and description work happens is vital to make the archive

truly inclusive. If institutions are committed to adopting anti-colonial practices, this cannot extend solely to how they present their collections to the public. If institutions truly want to democratize the archive, they need to decentre the archivist and acknowledge the collective effort of communities to preserve our shared cultural heritage. Though there have been several attempts to integrate multiculturalism into Canadian legislation, beginning with Trudeau's ambitious act almost 40 years ago, their impacts and execution must be continually interrogated to understand who is actually able to participate in these archival processes.

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