

Community First: Indigenous Community-Based Archival Provenance

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Abstract: Archives contain records that document the lives, cultures, and histories of Indigenous communities that are often organized within a governmental or colonial creation structure. This structure can create barriers to access for Indigenous communities and researchers that depend on those records. This article re-imagines archival methods of organization and proposes archival provenance based on Indigenous community needs and understanding.

Institutional, religious, and government archives across Canada contain the records which document the lives, cultures, and histories of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities. These archives are often hundreds of miles away from the Indigenous communities described in their holdings, and these archival records are frequently organized based on government or colonial structures. For example, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) is located in Ottawa, Ontario, contains records from Indigenous communities from every province and territory in Canada. This distance and how institutional archives organize records are barriers to Indigenous communities' access to their own history. This article reimagines archival methods of organization and proposes models for archival provenance based on Indigenous community needs and understanding.¹ We examine entrenched archival practice and emerging archival innovations such as community-based arrangement and community-guided organization of archives as a means of proposing alternative approaches to archival organization. We do this by rethinking archival ownership and provenance through the lens of Indigenous legal traditions, community ownership, and prioritizing Indigenous communities' needs to have access to their records and the ability to care for their information in a culturally appropriate way.

This article and our reflections on archival practice are rooted in our experiences working in community archives and witnessing individual and community frustration with archival organization and record location. Krista McCracken is a settler who lives and works in Baawating (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada). McCracken has worked at an Indigenous-centered archives, the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC), since 2010. They are grateful for the opportunities they have had to work alongside residential school Survivors and Indigenous communities and continue to learn by listening to Elders and Survivors. Skylee-Storm Hogan is Kahnawà:ke Kanien'kehá:ka on their father's side with settler heritage on their mother's side. Skylee-Storm began working with the SRSC as an assistant in 2015. Their work with the SRSC and Survivors' resilience shaped their approach to and advice on public history projects. We recognize that our recommendations and reimagining of provenance are rooted in our relationships with specific Indigenous communities and nations. These ideas will not be universally true across Indigenous peoples internationally. Archivists and archival organizations should do the work to build relationships with local Indigenous communities and stakeholders and make adjustments to archival practice based on ongoing,

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active collaboration with Indigenous peoples. We look to examples such as the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials and the Framework for Reconciliation in Canada's Archives as work that we can continue to learn from as we rethink archival practices. (First Archivists Circle, 2007; Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce of the Steering Committee on Canada's Archives, 2020).

Many archives use the archival concept of provenance to inform the organization of their archival materials. The term provenance refers to the person or organization that created or collected the items in fonds or collections. In practice, provenance pairs with the archival principles *respect des fonds*, which means that materials with the same provenance are kept together as a way to preserve their context, history, and origin. Records that have different provenance are kept apart. As a result of provenance-based archival practices, records that document Indigenous peoples' lives are often attributed to settlers, government agencies and religious organizations. The colonial interpretation of archival provenance can perpetuate extractive systems that removed Indigenous knowledge from communities (Bastian, 2006, pp. 267–268). Archival provenance has also been used to reinforce colonial understandings of history and ownership.² Provenance based on the creator is not the only way archives can be organized. The reconsideration of provenance is essential not only for archivists but also for all scholars who work with materials that document Indigenous peoples' lives. The historical over documentation of Indigenous peoples stretches beyond archives and is evident in a range of scholarly disciplines. By thinking critically about how archives document and preserve Indigenous peoples' lives, it is possible to understand better the truths and the power found in archival records.

Provenance, Ownership and Colonialism

Archival practice and theory have long viewed provenance as a crucial part of ensuring the integrity of archival records, and archival theory asserts that provenance helps preserve the context in which archival records are created (Nesmith, 1993, pp. 1–5). Records often have multiple provenances attached to them, meaning that more than one person was involved in their creation and use over time. Though one person's name might be signed on a letter, a single letter can provide insight into a community, refer to other people, and have relevance to far more people than the person who wrote it. A decolonized approach to archival practice “offers an opportunity to conceptualize and apply a wider, more generous and more inclusive archival lens to the relationships between communities and records” (Bastian, 2006, p. 268). Including a layered understanding of provenance, record creation, and ownership is essential in understanding archival records created in colonial contexts. This layered understanding requires the inclusion of Indigenous understandings and histories and recognizing that Indigenous peoples created the records that describe their lives (Cowan, 2018, pp.88–90). Ultimately, expanded provenance can contextualize archival records further and make them increasingly accessible to all scholars.

As an example of the challenges associated with colonial forms of provenance, it is useful to look at the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) in Canada. For many years the DIA was the primary documenter of Indigenous lives. The records kept by the DIA contain a vast range of information relevant to Indigenous communities on topics such as daily life, education, health, governance, land rights, and more. As early as the 1850s, it was apparent that there were challenges in maintaining records at the DIA, with an overwhelming number of records but limited staff available to help with their organization. Likewise, the geographically disbursed nature of the DIA, which had offices all across Canada, created challenges for the department's central record-keeping (Russell, 1984, pp. 51-53). Today, the legacy of the colonial organization which informed DIA recordkeeping continues to impact these records. For example, when describing the DIA records held by individual DIA offices across Canada, LAC notes:

The field offices have gone through numerous re-organizations, amalgamations and closures over the last one hundred and fifty years. Records produced by the field offices... may contain

unique information and provide a different perspective on administration of the department's programs. The National Archives of Canada has a selected, yet sparse, amount of material from the field offices. (Library and Archives Canada, 2018).

Finding records related to specific DIA field offices that worked with a First Nations community can be challenging, which is frustrating. It was local offices that had frequent interactions with First Nation communities and impacted local policies. Additionally, though DIA records are mostly a part of Record Group 10, LAC lists 11 different record groups where information documenting Indigenous lives might be found. (Library and Archives Canada, 2018). Navigating where records documenting a specific family, community, or event are located is not easy. Historian Mary Jane Logan McCallum (2018) has reflected on the experience of researching with DIA records at LAC as an Indigenous scholar, noting:

As Indigenous academics, in order to undertake work on our own communities, we must be able to afford to travel to the national capital—the symbol of our marginalization, the seat of federal power and white, masculine, colonial display. Here, we toil away reading records written and collected by people who were not part of our communities; records created and taken without our knowledge or consent under the regime of the Indian Act and later deposited according to pre-set mandates created, again, without our consultation. For this and other reasons, we will often find information in the archives that have been made unknown, kept confidential, or otherwise obscured. And although Indigenous voices are often absent, these documents are a vital part of Indigenous history.

Logan McCallum's words clearly articulate some of the challenges of searching colonial records for Indigenous history. Records that document Indigenous peoples have been created without their consent and organized according to colonial logic, not Indigenous communities' needs. Colonial archiving practices at LAC and elsewhere create barriers to accessing Indigenous community and family histories. Finding information about specific Indigenous communities or individuals in LAC often requires digging through government organization layers and understanding how DIA relationships with an Indigenous community have existed historically. Additionally, many colonial records were created during periods of history where the government was in charge of naming and creating First Nations communities. A First Nation's name may have changed since the creation of those records, or records may be grouped with other materials that have very little to do with that specific cultural group or territory. DIA records and other government records combined First Nations with very little kinship or cultural connectivity for the colonial establishment's practical use. For the contemporary Indigenous researcher, this adds an extra layer of decoding and a barrier to accessing kin or community information. Names of individuals and anglicized spellings of names also create inconsistencies in records and difficulty finding and accessing relevant materials.

Indigenous Rights and Archival Provenance

By changing archival record organization, actively engaging Indigenous stakeholders, and utilizing what Tom Nesmith (2006) has termed "societal provenance," it is possible to understand how and why colonial records were created and to rightfully acknowledge the impact Indigenous peoples had on record creation (pp. 351–352). To reimagine archival provenance, "we need to search for and recognize all participants in the creation of an archive as authors and sources of provenance. This may require acknowledging the multiple points of origins for our collections" (Reilly, 2005). We need to reconsider record creation and think about everyone involved, including those previously unnamed Indigenous peoples.

In 2007, the First Archivists Circle released the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM) to encourage and provide a model of respectful collaboration between Indigenous communities

and archives in the United States. These recommendations were created by a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous archivists and were created as “best professional practices for culturally responsive care and use of American Indian archival material held by non-tribal organizations.” (First Archivists Circle, 2007). The PNAAM recommendations have existed for more than a decade and include specific guidelines for archival staff and organizations working with Indigenous archival material or Indigenous communities. At the forefront of these recommendations is recognizing Indigenous communities as sovereign, independent nations who have a right to be involved in decisions about archival material that documents them. However, the library and archival professions did not immediately accept the PNAAM recommendations and many of the objections revolved around the destabilization of archival norms and the challenges they presented to colonial ethics, such as concepts of privacy, access, and ownership that intertwined with archival practice (Boles, George-Shongo, & Weideman, 2008, p. 10).

Since 2007, more archivists and organizations have begun to rethink how they work with Indigenous communities and archival records that document Indigenous lives. Community-engaged provenance means acknowledging the rights of Indigenous peoples to records that document their lives. The principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) are one place archivists can start when thinking about how Indigenous rights intersect with archival records. OCAP asserts that First Nations have a right to steward and control how information about their community is recorded, stored, accessed, and preserved over time (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2020). There is a direct correlation between the OCAP principles and the archival practices that determine who owns archival records and who has access to them.

Additionally, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor (2016) have argued: “the archivist has an affective responsibility to those about whom those records are created, often unwittingly and unwillingly.” Archivists have a responsibility to the people documented in the records they care for, and this includes an obligation to Indigenous and colonial people documented by nation-states. Applying the principles of OCAP and rethinking a Western understanding of ownership is part of an active process to reposition Indigenous peoples’ agency in relation to archival records. The creation of archives results from human actions that need to be contextualized within their power structures and societal position (McCracken, 2019).

Hogan has used OCAP as a researcher in historical services and an archivist, and they understand it from their Indigenous community perspective. For Hogan, the principles of OCAP feel necessary and make archival provenance more effective for both Indigenous people’s use and settler understandings of collections containing Indigenous materials or documenting Indigenous peoples. Hogan thinks that researchers and historians should default to the communities they incorporate in their research or their projects, as communities deserve to know the uses of their information to prevent further harm. McCracken has used OCAP to guide their practice as an archivist at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC), using it to structure conversations about copyright and think about the ways that materials from the SRSC are reproduced in academic papers or media. In practice, this means making sure Survivors from the Shingwauk Residential School are involved in all conversations about the use of material that documents their early lives and the institution’s legacy.

Government archival institutions have a unique position of power in comparison to other archives. There have been systemic barriers to government-run archival institutions looking to adopt the OCAP principles into their structures (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014). LAC has the most challenge in adhering to the OCAP principles because of the Access to Information Act and legislation governing Access to Information and Privacy Requests. These legal structures prevent government agencies from selectively protecting the information they gather about Indigenous communities or allowing community input on how they want their information shared (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014).

OCAP principles are also in conflict with the Library and Archives of Canada Act, which asks that all records in the federal government’s control or institutions be transferred to the Archives when they are no

longer in use. When those records transfer to the government archives, they are then subject to ATIP requests, which can identify Indigenous peoples in personal detail if they have been deceased for twenty years or more (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014). This Act directly violates the principles of OCAP and exposes families and communities of Indigenous people to potential traumas associated with the information of their ancestors. Hogan found this problematic during professional and personal research at LAC. The records' contents went from mundane correspondence on finances or Department bureaucracy to casual dehumanization and detailed personal information about Indigenous community residents. While Hogan expected this because of the nature of the DIA and the government's work in Indigenous communities, the context of why people wrote these letters was not always apparent from the record description. The files themselves are not organized well and often jumped from one community to another, making them difficult to use effectively. Additionally, Hogan noticed other Indigenous people were accessing the records, some of whom appeared to be in various states of emotional distress. Hogan felt exhausted after reading these files, and the microfilm review room did not have private viewing areas; they knew that they would have to process their traumas outside of the space or after they returned home.

OCAP is only one of the possible ways to reimagine how archival information based on Indigenous peoples is shared and cared for within archives. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the United Nations Joint-Orontlicher Principles (UNJOP) both have language that explicitly applies to the stewardship of knowledge and the rights of Indigenous communities to be involved in that stewardship. The goals of both UNDRIP and UNJOP are rooted in the ideas of community access, stewardship, and control of historical and cultural materials that directly document their heritage. Archivist Greg Bak (2017) has argued, "a number of UNDRIP articles emphasize the importance of Indigenous ownership and control over representations of their own identity, culture and history. Although archives are not specifically mentioned in UNDRIP, it is easy to see how archival missions are implicated" (p.4). For example, UNDRIP (2008) articles 13 and 31 assert that "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures." The Indigenous right to control and manage Indigenous cultural heritage has significant implications for archival practice and can be a starting point for rethinking how archives collaborate with and involve Indigenous communities in archival work.

The Indigenous right to control information is also evident in how concepts of copyright and ownership play out in the archives. For example, when publishing Indigenous knowledge through academic research or appropriation, the "legal" copyright is held by the author of the published work, not the Indigenous peoples to whom it rightfully belongs. Therefore, if a settler documented Indigenous communities and then deposited their work in an archive, the copyright belongs to the settler who recorded the knowledge. Indigenous legal customs do not incorporate well into Canadian legal systems. In some communities, protocols prohibit the sharing and gaining of knowledge by outsiders, making the publishing or the copyright ownership of them inherently problematic. There are steps to accessing teachings around ceremonial and cultural practices that prevent further damage and drain of sacred knowledge caused by anthropology and archaeological pursuits. The Canadian Federation of Library Association's (2018) Position Statement on Indigenous Knowledge in Canada's Copyright Act clearly states that Canada's Copyright Act does not protect Indigenous knowledge. Decisions around who has legal ownership of Indigenous knowledge is often at odds with Indigenous ways of knowing and sharing. This lack of protection is critical when archives consider how they share the information which documents Indigenous lives. Just because archival material is in the public domain does not mean it is ethical to share it. Living descendants of these communities can feel the impacts of dehumanization and dispossession when material culture, stories, and records are shared without consent. UNDRIP, OCAP, and PNAAM all advocate for Indigenous peoples' rights to protect and govern their information. This means archives need to be working

with Indigenous peoples and communities to determine how archival materials are shared, organized, and made accessible.

Reimagined Archival Provenance in Practice

Community-driven models of provenance are not a new concept. Many archives, museums, and libraries contain ephemera collections, vertical files, or newspaper clippings organized thematically. The general public frequently uses these collections to gain information about a specific topic or as a starting point for research. Beyond this type of collection, archival organizations have embraced community-driven provenance models when organizing records connected to Indigenous communities and peoples. The SRSC's approach to describing and naming archival collections is an example of shifting approaches to provenance. When McCracken began working at the SRSC in 2010, collections of photographs connected to the Shingwauk Indian Residential School were known as the Principal's Collection. These photographs came from many undocumented sources divided into series based on each Shingwauk principal's administration term. The arrangement made logical sense as around half of the photographs centered on the staff and principals of Shingwauk and the other half on Shingwauk students' photographs from 1900 to the 1960s. Organizing these photographs by School Principal tenure acknowledges the role the School administration had in creating photographic documentation of the Schools and uses this information as the basis of provenance and arrangement. This method of organizing also allowed for the arrangement of photographs into chronological periods. However, there was a significant downside to this arrangement—namely, that it centered the Shingwauk School staff and not the students. Some series named after Principals included known abusers, and the abuser's name would repeatedly confront anyone using those records. In 2015 McCracken began considering how to organize these photographs better to meet the Survivor community's needs who accessed the archives. Many Survivors wanted to search photographs by years, student name, or First Nation name. The insertion of the Shingwauk principals' name into the description was not helping with access and was not making the photographs easier to find. SRSC staff worked closely with the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA)—comprised of Survivors and their descendants connected to the Shingwauk Residential School—to get feedback on how they accessed photographs, their arrangement, and what challenges they had in finding information in the SRSC archives. As a result of the discussion with Survivors, a decision was made to rename and reframe these photographs. Instead of using the Principal's tenure as the organizing provenance for the photographs, the photographs are now part of a Shingwauk Indian Residential School photograph series organized by decade. The photographs' original arrangement and what the series was previously named is included in a notes field. This re-naming seems minor at first glance—but words have power, and how archival materials are described matters. By no longer centering on the Shingwauk Principals' authority, this new organization prioritizes Survivor access and the SRSC users' needs. Not only for those Survivors who lived through the tenures of these Principals but now their descendants can search for ancestors by relevant decade. This example highlights how SRSC staff continue to have conversations with the Survivor community about the archive serving them best. However, it is also important to note that there can be varying opinions and ideas within Indigenous communities. Within the CSAA, different Survivors have different ideas about how to record their experiences within archives. CSAA operates through a sharing-circle consensus model, and often this means that decisions involve a lot of dialogue and reflection. The decision to rename the archival collections and reframe their organization was made through this governance style. Through regular conversations and meetings with Survivors and their families, the SRSC has taken a community approach to archival arrangement and integrated Survivor perspectives into their archival practice.

The Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre (IRSHDC) at the University of British Columbia has also taken an alternative approach to provenance. The IRSHDC provides access to the archives cared for by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. It also works to “continually collect and integrate Survivor stories, records, information, and conversations about the residential school system into its collections from donors and institutional partners” (University of British Columbia, 2020). The IRSHDC primarily operates as a post-custodial archive, aggregating digital copies of Residential School records held at archives across Canada. Figure 1 (below) shows the method of organization IRSHDC has used for its archival records. Instead of digitally organizing records by who created them or which repository they are from, the IRSHDC has organized materials according to which Residential School the materials connect.

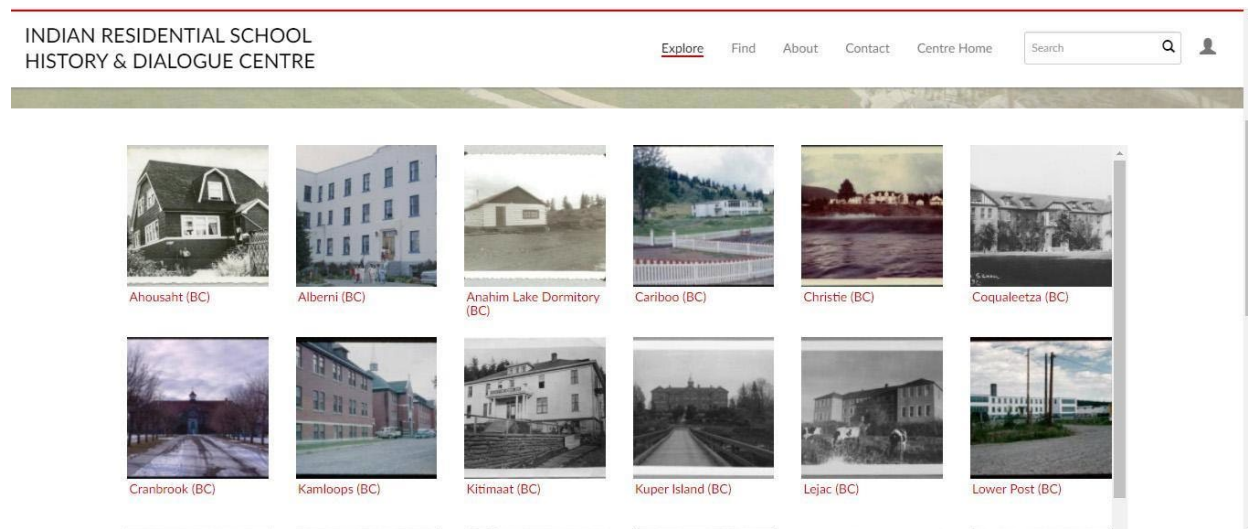


Figure 1: Screenshot of IRSHDC archival database BC Residential School page

<https://collections.irshdc.ubc.ca/index.php/Explore/schools>

Beyond organizing archival materials by associated Residential Schools, the IRSHDC has privileged and foregrounded information about the photographs and the people in the photographs. As Figure 2 (below) shows, information about the associated archival repository, archival number, and alternative title are available via a more information dropdown. This decision to visually hide the archival repository information is a significant departure from how many archives organize and display archival material online. The IRSHDC’s use of metadata and descriptive language is intentional and designed to make content accessible to Survivors and Indigenous communities. By prioritizing students’ names and the Residential Schools’ location, recognizing that this information is how many users search in archives—not by archival numbers, the names of the original creators of the materials, or archival repositories. This design shows how archival arrangement can be reimagined on a large scale through the use of technology. As a post-custodial archive, the IRSHDC has digital copies of thousands of images from multiple repositories and has used technology to challenge traditional forms of arrangement and ownership.

Home > Find > Photograph



Photograph

Photograph

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION 

Image > Photograph

Related School

Lejac (BC)

Curatorial comment

Class photo of uniformed students. Inscription reads "Lejac C.A."

THEMES

> OPERATION OF THE IRS SYSTEM (narrative thread)

> DAILY LIFE > UNIFORMS & CLOTHING (themes)

> PEOPLE > STUDENTS (themes)

MORE INFORMATION 

< BACK

 LOGIN TO ADD TO LIGHTBOX ASK A QUESTION REQUEST TAKEDOWN

DISCUSSION

Do you have a story to contribute related to these records or a comment about this item?

LOGIN/REGISTER TO COMMENT

Figure 2: Screenshot of individual record on the IRSHDC website.

<https://collections.irshdc.ubc.ca/index.php/Detail/objects/2285>

In the case of both the SRSC and the IRSHDC, conscious decisions about how archival materials are arranged were made. Both institutions have opted to organize records by how Residential School Survivors commonly search for these records. This organization of records and place-based provenance shifts the archival records away from the colonial act of recordkeeping and focuses on the Indigenous peoples' experiences documented in records.³

Recommendations for doing the work

Beyond these two examples, how can more archivists and archival organizations rethink provenance to be more community-oriented? In particular, how can archivists work with Indigenous communities to make provenance more relevant to them and reflective of Indigenous community history and needs? When community archives make decisions or arrange their collections, they begin their work by asking themselves, "what does this mean to the people who use it" (Cushman, 2013, p.120). The recommendations included here are written based on the authors' experiences and positionality and the communities that have worked with them. The authors recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to re-thinking provenance and that Indigenous communities are unique with varying needs. Likewise, the authors strongly suggest that archivists seek to build meaningful and ongoing relationships with Indigenous communities in addition to these recommendations.

- Evaluate existing provenance and arrangement of archival materials and work to identify any archival materials which mention Indigenous peoples or communities.
- Rethink organization of collections documenting Indigenous peoples. Any decisions around records about Indigenous peoples should be rooted in community conversations and relationships with Indigenous peoples.
- Listen to Indigenous researchers, visitors, and communities if they disclose their experiences while accessing archival material.
- If there is an Indigenous-focused collection or the collection contains Indigenous materials, consider creating a comfortable space specifically for Indigenous researchers to access the materials.

- Work with relevant Indigenous communities to decide how representative archival materials should be organized, described, and made accessible.
- Work with relevant Indigenous communities, elders, and knowledge keepers to re-attach context to collections and create processes and protocols to care for archives that may have cultural and spiritual significance.

Archives have the potential to be spaces that actively support Indigenous access to documentary history and the reclamation of cultural heritage. They have the further potential to help Indigenous researchers and educators reclaim knowledges for their communities. Many institutions have the flexibility to explore different concepts of ownership, access, and Indigenous involvement in that organizational structure. However, colonial principles of provenance and respect des fonds can mean records pertaining to an Indigenous community are spread across colonial archival repositories and collections. Through the community-based organization of records, it is possible to make archives easier to navigate and more accessible to Indigenous communities. While government institutions are limited legally by colonial constructs that run counter to Indigenous concepts of ownership, there are still opportunities for institutions to collaborate with local communities meaningfully and explore principles of provenance rooted in the community and Indigenous rights. Archives need to do the work to make records documenting Indigenous peoples easier to access and locate.

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Notes

- ¹ Indigenous concepts of community are directly linked to concepts of kinship. Who belongs to an Indigenous community is often informed by, but not limited to, family descent, community involvement, clan affiliation, adoption, language, culture, and shared experience. Immense diversity in kinship practices exists among the Indigenous peoples who reside in the land now known as Canada. Additionally, colonial practices such as status legislation and the Indian Act have created political and legal interpretations of what it means to be Indigenous or part of an Indigenous community. For further reading on this complex issue, see Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel’s “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 597–614.
- ² For example, archival provenance is based on understandings of ownership that are often tied to copyright and Western legal systems. These systems do not account of Indigenous concepts of community ownership or Indigenous Traditional Knowledge that is transmitted intergenerationally.
- ³ Other examples of Indigenous community centered archival provenance and archival practice include the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario and the Aanischaaukamikw (Cree Cultural Institute) in Oujé-Bougoumou, Quebec.

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