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***Nada nukuthdam, Firekeepers Initiative: Decolonizing Academic Library
Collections through Community-based Participatory Archive-building***

Lorrie McAllister

University Library, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States.

Alexander Soto

University Library, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, United States.



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Abstract:

This paper articulates the decolonial theories and principles that underlie the library and archives information praxis within an Indigenous-led academic center located within a major research university. The Firekeepers Initiative to develop community-based archives in collaboration with Tribal Nations in Arizona, utilizes participatory and relational methods, CARE principles, and the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials. This initiative employs Community-Driven Archives methods set forth by Godoy (2021) and seeks to decolonize higher education through Indigenous librarianship and reparative archival practice. Authors stress the importance of mindful place-making in academic libraries to elevate Indigenous voices within what are typically Western Colonial information spaces. Challenges include navigating organizational hierarchies within the academy to advocate and coordinate services and programs for Indigenous students, faculty, and their communities.

Keywords: Indigenous librarianship, academic libraries, decolonization, community archives, Tribal sovereignty

Introduction: *Nada nukuthdam*, Firekeepers Initiative: Decolonizing Academic Library Collections through Community-based Participatory Archive-building

Firekeepers are those who watch over and tend flames. When unattended, fires may be harmful, destructive, and have lasting negative effects, yet when they are tended with care and attention, fire may be used for good health, ceremony, regeneration, sovereignty and long-term community wellbeing and resilience. The Labriola National American Indian Data Center (Labriola Center) at Arizona State University Library has named our community-based participatory archives initiative *Nada nukuthdam*, or *Firekeepers*, to characterize a reparative and healing approach to academic information spaces that have long been sites of oppression and harm for Indigenous Peoples due to traditional Western Colonial approaches to information and the practices associated with providing access and services to library and archives collections. *Nada nukuthdam*, which is in the O’odham language, reflects our relationship with O’odham communities and foregrounds how our team centers their ontologies and epistemologies in our efforts.

With care and attention, a mindful tending practice may be employed within libraries, archives, museums, and other information and cultural heritage institutions. It requires opening up traditional Western Colonial systems and practices to new inputs, including the ways of being and knowing embodied by the people who produce, use, manage, and preserve information. Supporting and affirming practices of Indigenous librarianship and reparative archives and curation work within academic libraries is key. Centering the Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies of those who are engaged in the work, aids in reconceiving and changing information practices, services, and spaces. Changing traditional Colonial information practices in this way ensures that Indigenous Peoples and their communities will benefit from the organization of and access to information. Information is not objective, but grounded in culture, embodied by people, and documented through a myriad of methods and formats. The sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples relies on culturally-grounded information-keeping for cultural, spiritual, and physical wellbeing, including the information contained within libraries, archives, and museums.

DECOLONIZING HIGHER EDUCATION

Decolonizing approaches to information work within institutions of higher education are foregrounded by the scholarship and teachings of Indigenous educators. There are several foundational works that inform our understanding of how to ground “Indigenized” practices within Non-Tribal Institutions of Higher Education. The “Four Rs” of Indigenous research (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991), being *Respect*, *Relevance*, *Reciprocity*, and *Responsibility*, offer a basis for conceiving of this work within institutions of higher education. Brayboy’s Tribal Critical Race theory (Brayboy, 2006) offers nine tenets to further elucidate the issues faced by Indigenous learners and researchers in higher education within the United States. Pidgeon’s Indigenous Wholistic Framework illustrates how all levels of the university need to be committed to the Indigenization of higher education, which in turn opens up Tribal Nation-building possibilities to students (Pidgeon, 2016). Additionally, Tsosie et al. (2022) outlines the “Six Rs” of Indigenous research, adding *Relationship* and *Representation* to the four Rs above. It is

Relationship, which is “grounded in complex layers of Indigenous identity and relationship with land, nature, ancestors, community, and future generations” that underlies culturally-informed information work. *Representation* includes who is hired and at what level within institutions of higher education, and therefore, whose voice is heard when decisions are made. Representation of Indigenous community members within decision-making processes empowers them to “identify and share what is relevant to their people” in service to their community’s interests (Tsose et al., 2022). These ideas are just a few examples of the theory and ideas that ground our work within Arizona State University.

PLACE-MAKING IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

The Labriola National American Indian Data Center at Arizona State University Library seeks to decolonize and develop archives and library collections, services, and spaces that center Indigenous Knowledges, respect community intellectual and cultural heritage rights, and co-develop archives with Indigenous community partners. This work is critical within the southwestern region of the United States, the ancestral territories of many diverse Indigenous Peoples. Arizona, the 48th and last state formed within the continental United States, is home to twenty-two federally recognized sovereign Tribal Nations that have jurisdiction over approximately twenty-eight percent of the state’s lands, which is more than twenty million acres (ADEQ, 2022). In addition to the federally recognized Tribes, Arizona is also home to one unrecognized Tribe, the Hia-Ced O’odham. Arizona State University’s four campuses in the Phoenix Metro area occupy land within the Salt River Valley, the ancestral territories of the Akimel O’odham (Pima), Pee Posh (Maricopa) Indian Communities (Arizona Board of Regents, 2022). Its Tucson campus resides on the ancestral lands of the Tohono O’odham. ASU Library developed a land acknowledgement statement as a foundational principle for the development, management and enhancement of its many services. The acknowledgement is:

“The ASU Library acknowledges the twenty-three Native Nations that have inhabited this land for centuries. Arizona State University's four campuses are located in the Salt River Valley on ancestral territories of Indigenous Peoples, including the Akimel O’odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) Indian Communities, whose care and keeping of these lands allows us to be here today. ASU Library acknowledges the sovereignty of these nations and seeks to foster an environment of success and possibility for Native American students and patrons. We are advocates for the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems and research methodologies within contemporary library practice. ASU Library welcomes members of the Akimel O’odham and Pee Posh, and all Native nations to the Library.”

(Arizona Board of Regents, 2022)

Our library services aim to support Tribal sovereignty through the ongoing development of collections, programs, events, and library spaces that support the success of Indigenous learners, scholars, and Tribal community partners (Soto, 2023).

The decolonial approach used by ASU Library stands in contrast to the often-reiterated “facts” documenting settler Colonial narratives of Arizona that persist today. Stories of “progress” toward statehood during the Territorial Period (1848-1912) included the U.S. military and white pioneer domination of the land, its resources, and its people, through force, including “Indian Wars” with the Native Peoples who have for generations called this land their homes (Arizona

State Library, n.d.). The American glorification of western notions of progress also extends to systems of education (Hemphill & Blakely, 2015). In Arizona and throughout North America, narratives of progress have served to erase and oppress Indigenous Peoples; within education, Indian boarding schools were places of erasure for Indigenous children and their families, where white Colonial settler culture and language was prioritized (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

Oppressive educational structures also extended to the development and teaching of histories of Indigenous Peoples in the southwest region. For example, David Martinez, professor in American Indian Studies at ASU, notes that the Hia-Ced O’odham, a Tribal Nation in Arizona, were considered “extinct” from the American perspective, which has severely hampered their ability to be federally recognized as a Tribe by the United States government (Whitby, 2022). With this erasure of Indigenous Peoples thoroughly embedded in the dominant culture, Indigenous libraries serve as a space/place to unsettle so-called “settler evidence” by formulating and legitimizing anti-Colonial conceptions of evidence that take into account Tribal contexts and practices of creation (Montenegro, 2019). ASU Library acknowledges that place-making within academic institutions must recognize the settler Colonial histories and remake safe spaces within education. Place-making, for many Indigenous Peoples, is a community activity, rooted in the culture of the ancestral Tribal lands and embodied by its people (Basso, 1996). Keeping Tribal histories, therefore, is important to the development and implementation of culturally-relevant information services for Indigenous Peoples in the places we practice education.

Decolonization of academic libraries and archives is essential for the wellbeing of Indigenous learners and scholars and must be a community-based activity that respects and honors places as an integral part of reparative information work within the academy. Roy’s overview of Indigenous archives situates archival work as an extension of decolonization and culture revitalization (Roy & Alonzo, 2003). They stress that the content of Indigenous archives take on a deeper meaning than most non-Indigenous archives since they seek to facilitate cultural transmission of Indigenous knowledge, specifically language revitalization. Due to this, Tribes may need to modify archival practices to create culturally-informed collection care practices and metadata tags. Roy and Alonzo (2003) also noted how this “Indigenization” of archival work must be guided by community input, specifically from cultural and Tribal government leaders.

NAVIGATING HIERARCHIES WITHIN THE ACADEMY

One challenge in setting the stage for the recent growth of the Labriola American Indian Data Center was marshaling the resources necessary to transform the unit, which is situated within a robust academic institutional structure. An endowment from Frank and Mary Labriola on April 1, 1993, was established to support Indigenous students through this library center. Frank Labriola was the founder and chief executive officer of Pinalco (Pima Aluminum Company), one of the first major companies located on the Gila River Indian Community, and therefore, was a major employer of its members (Murphy, 2023). This endowment was the beginning of a commitment to Indigenous library service development at ASU. For decades, the center was supported by one staff member and student workers, who were able to sustain modest levels of collection development, processing, cataloging, and reading and reference service provision. This was the case until there was a groundswell of interest, advocacy, and resources committed across the university to American Indian and Alaska Native / Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander student success.

Within the past decade, the University has invested in its academic programs that serve the research interests of Indigenous, particularly with the development of the School of Social Transformation and the American Indian Studies program within The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Between 2012 and 2022, ASU also raised its American Indian and Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander employee numbers by 26 percent¹ (Office of Institutional Analysis, 2023). This increase in Indigenous representation is part of the positive movement to broaden inclusive academic programs. Likewise, ASU's Center for Indian Education and American Indian Policy Institute, have attracted researchers and faculty to the university, and the expansion of American Indian Student Support Services have enabled increased student retention rates. These academic programs and support services are complementary to the Labriola Center's services that support Indigenous researchers and learners, but the coordinating mechanisms to bring these units together is the key to our recent success.

Strong leadership within ASU's Office of American Indian Initiatives (OAI) has been instrumental to mobilizing and strengthening support for programs that support Indigenous students and researchers. This office was "created to serve as the liaison between Arizona State University and the 22 federally recognized Arizona Tribal nations and their citizens" and "works to serve as the voice for American Indian and Alaska Natives whether they be students, staff, faculty or representing the tribes themselves" (Arizona Board of Regents, 2022a). Building a strong network of administrators, faculty, academic professionals, and staff has raised the profile of American Indian justice and advocacy work within the university. This work is mission-aligned for ASU, in that its charter states:

ASU is a comprehensive **public research university**, measured not by whom it excludes, but by **whom it includes** and **how they succeed**; advancing **research and discovery** of public value; and assuming **fundamental responsibility** for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the **communities it serves**.

(Arizona Board of Regents, 2022b, emphasis in original)

This inclusive approach to operating a public university in Arizona is a real strength of ASU and has enabled the internal network of administrators, faculty, and other leaders to raise and elevate the needs and interests of learners from Arizona's Tribal Nations.

ELEVATING INDIGENOUS VOICES THROUGH ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

With the broader momentum towards reparative justice for the Tribal Nations in Arizona, and the focus on the success of American Indian students within ASU, ASU Library was able to significantly increase resources dedicated to its Labriola National American Indian Data Center. The center was able to hire four new Indigenous information professionals and staff over the past two years, all of whom have community ties to Tribal Nations within Arizona and in the case of the director, is a citizen of the Tohono O'odham Nation (Soto, 2023). This presented the opportunity to rethink library and archival practices, with the values and interests of local Tribal Nations at the forefront of these processes. With its all-Indigenous staff's commitment to provide library services that value community, kinship consent and sovereignty, the Labriola Center has been able to activate Indigenous librarianship in O'odham territory. Within ASU, we have been

¹ *Employees include Administrators, Faculty, Academic Professionals/Postdocs, University/Classified Staff, and Graduate Assistants/Associates.*

effective in linking Native student success with culturally appropriate library services. This is illustrated with our culturally appropriate research services, collections and array of programming that centers Indigenous ways of knowing, lived experiences, and creative expressions. Outside of ASU, we have been able to communicate to Tribal communities in Arizona the importance of Indigenous librarianship for K-12 literacy, cultural reclamation and Tribal nation-building. The expansion of staffing has positioned the Labriola Center to serve as a critical example of how Indigenous libraries can address a wide range of needs in Indian Country. Our action-oriented, land-based approach to information mediation, which is rooted in decolonization and cultural resilience frameworks, has allowed the Labriola Center to emerge as a practice space to enact the Six Rs of Indigenous education, and academic concepts like Indigenous data sovereignty (Soto, 2023).

Developing ASU Library's Indigenous land acknowledgement was a first step that allowed action-based initiatives that support Tribal sovereignty to flow from this statement of values (see Arizona Board of Regents, 2022). With this foundation in place, our collections services unit undertook a holistic review of our information practices concerning the acquisition, management, digitization, metadata, patron requesting, and access mechanism within our patron services. This review prompted our adoption of the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM) (See First Archivist Circle, 2007). Work progressed to include the development of a Case Study for the Society of American Archivists' call for Access Policies for Native American Archival Materials (Sanchez et al., 2021).

The *Protocols* work stepped us forward in decolonizing our archival collections through an overarching review of collections containing Indigenous cultural heritage and intellectual property. The Labriola Center team also adopted the Community-Driven Archives (CDA) methodology, set forth by Nancy Godoy (2021), to amend and build new Tribal government-to-Institutional partnerships that center the needs and voices of Tribal nations within information spaces.

Employing a relational approach to what was previously traditional university Library work, led us to receive a major 3-year grant focused on building a community-based participatory archives framework for non-Tribal institutions that work with Tribal communities. The grant, *Firekeepers: Building Archival Data Sovereignty through Indigenous Memory Keeping (Firekeepers)*, was funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and is currently underway. In order to realize archival data sovereignty, Tribal citizens and communities require a culturally-grounded grassroots approach to information governance, along with appropriate legal documents that respect their intellectual property, Traditional Knowledge, traditional cultural expressions, and other cultural information (IP/TK/TCE) when working with non-Tribal institutions. We are developing legal agreements that respect IP/TK/TCE and provide sustainable governance for managing ongoing relationships over the lifetimes of future generations. The Hia-Ced O'odham in Arizona is the first Tribal community partner in this new initiative.

The seeds of this partnership with the Hia-Ced O'odham were only made possible by the center's overall placemaking efforts within the university. As the only Indigenous-led library center within a doctoral research university in the continental United States, the Labriola Center has been effective at communicating the utility and value of Indigenous librarianship to students, faculty, and community members from Tribal communities. By making a culturally safe space for

Indigenous library users to engage with knowledge, the Labriola staff is able to share how Indigenous archives can be developed in parallel to traditional approaches to Indigenous memory keeping.

Memory-keeping is at the heart of the *Firekeepers* initiative. Our team has adopted Godoy's (2021) approach to community-driven archives (CDA). This approach is rooted in intersectional critical race theory that embraces a "love ethic" that uses Gloria Anzaldúa's path to *conocimiento* as an epistemological framework for justice work (Godoy, 2021). The CDA approach employs forging community relationships as a way to build the trust necessary to co-design and collaboratively develop archives. The CDA mantra of "engage, educate and empower!" characterizes the desire to center the lived experiences and knowledge of community members to create intersectional and intergenerational safe spaces where learning and memory-keeping activities act as tools of justice (see Arizona Board of Regents, 2022c). Once adopted by the Labriola Center, we provided an overview of how archiving may be a tool for Indigenous culture-keeping (Soto, 2023). The first workshop we are developing for our Tribal community partner consists of a presentation that centers the archives from Indigenous perspectives. We give an overview of archival processes such as appraisal, arrangement, description, and physical and digital preservation. Once outlined, we then describe elements of an Indigenous archival praxis which consists of a synthesis of and not limited to: Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, Indigenous Licensing Agreements, Traditional Knowledge (TK) labels, and the Mukurtu Content Management System. By adopting CDA as a means of culture-keeping, Indigenous Peoples can document contemporary Indigenous memory on their terms, thereby tending their own memory and culture-keeping.

By implementing an Indigenized approach to CDA with Tribal communities, specifically our partnerships with numerous Tribal libraries in Arizona seeking CDA support, various American Indian Studies (AIS) students became intrigued by our efforts and wanted to learn more. One such student was Hia-Ced O'odham and was so intrigued that she applied for and earned a student library position with the center. From there, she shared our CDA efforts with her community and its governing body, the Hia-Ced O'odham LLC, who are pursuing federal recognition for all Hia-Ced O'odham (Garcia, 2023). This led to CDA workshops with Hia-Ced O'odham leadership and elders, who at first were skeptical of archives due to its association with Euro-centric Colonial approaches to information management and history. But over time, Labriola staff was able to share the potential of an Indigenous archival praxis, which if enacted, would ensure the safeguarding of its community archive that was established by a community archivist in the mid-1900s. Through these workshops, Labriola staff became aware of the extent of the community archives, which consisted of 11 banker boxes of paper-based material, 16 large maps of Hia-Ced O'odham territory (southern Arizona and northern Mexico near the Gulf of California) and 408 cassette tapes containing community history spanning from the late 1970s to 2010s. After learning more about the center and Indigenous librarianship, the Hia-Ced O'odham began to recognize the value of Indigenous archives to unsettle the Colonial record that lists them as extinct and/or not a distinctive Tribe within the O'odham community.

Due to the history of settler Colonialism in the American southwest and Northern Mexico, the Hia-Ced O'odham are the only O'odham Tribe who are not recognized by the United States and lack a protective landbase. This lack of recognition and overall narrative of extinction has marginalized their voice in settler Colonial history and made it difficult for them to assert their

autonomy and sovereignty when protecting their land from development and desecration, specifically by the US-Mexico border (Martinez, 2020). But once learning more about Indigenous approaches to archives, they sought out our help to obtain a one-year 2021 Arts Foundation for Tucson and Southern Arizona community grant to digitize the audio cassettes. Through consultation, the Labriola Center staff helped them apply for a successful award. With the completion of the grant and with the tapes now digitized, this led to larger conversation on digital preservation and culturally appropriate access. By listening to the community, Labriola Center staff ascertain their desire to co-develop an archive that respects O’odham *himdag* (ways of knowing) and an archive that would support their federal recognition petition. Based on prior Labriola Center CDA workshops, they expressed an interest to utilize Indigenous-informed library technologies, like the Mukurtu content management system, and pursue culturally-grounded grassroots approaches to information governance, along with appropriate legal documents that respect their IP/TK/TCE. Due to the scope of these areas of librarianship and the emphasis to adhere to community archival needs, the Labriola Center pursued large scale grant opportunities in order to best co-develop an archive that meets their socio-political needs. Our ability to listen and meet them where they were at forged our partnership with the Hia-Ced O’odham LCC, which has led us to the *Firekeepers* initiative. This grant also has capacity to take on additional O’odham partners, which at this time, are being finalized. Due to the degree of community involvement and expertise needed to meet grant deliverables, this initiative has a dedicated Indigenous Education Specialist who can best break down academic terms and approaches, like Indigenous data sovereignty and Traditional Knowledge (TK) labels, to community members. Additionally, it will have a dedicated O’odham Language Specialist, who will work with the Project Archivist to best formulate O’odham metadata and description information and will work with O’odham community members to establish community protocols that will govern access.

Through our community based participatory archives approach, we seek to develop Indigenous-informed archival frameworks and resources *with community not on behalf of* community. Rather than parachute in with academic solutions that are often not practical in Indigenous communities, instead we will listen and learn from community experts to best co-create archives that align with their approach to memory keeping. As an all-Indigenous library staff, the Labriola Center will leverage its academic privilege to Tribal communities in hopes of becoming a lifeline for Indigenous information management. In all interactions, we draw from Indigeneity to best support Indigenous knowledge. We believe our efforts in this grant and overall mission highlight the need to hire a team of Indigenous information professionals within Non-Indigenous library institutions This is mainly because through our survivance, we as Indigenous Peoples have experience deploying grassroots strategies rooted in Indigenous kinship in order to transform settler Colonial systems never designed for us (Vizenor, 2008). By pulling from our survivance and overall teachings from our communities, the *Firekeepers* initiative highlights how an Indigenous archival praxis can be an extension of Indigenous memory keeping in this century, as well as a mechanism to unsettle the Colonial record for Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

The Labriola Center has begun to demonstrate why Indigenous librarians and archivists are so important to decolonization and change within academic library spaces. Through this process, it

seeks to enact the Protocols for Native American Archival Material (Protocols) and Indigenous Data sovereignty (IDSov) principles within its operations. Through our work, we will continue to highlight and promote the role of Indigenous information professionals and staff within this process and how Indigenous librarianship upholds and bolsters Tribal Sovereignty among the Tribal Nations on Turtle Island. The *Firekeepers* initiative demonstrates the level of care and attention Indigenous librarians and archivists can provide in cultural reclamation efforts that involve Indigenous information and memory keeping. By watching over and tending the flames of change sparked by Indigenous memory, we believe Indigenous archives can be a source of good health, ceremony, regeneration, sovereignty and long-term community wellbeing and resilience. This initiative, and the overall Labriola Center mission, highlights the need to empower Indigenous librarians and archivists in positions of leadership since only we can articulate and implement library services that support Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty.

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