Archived Anthropology:
Thorny Issues of Disposition and Access in a Time of Change

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Introduction

As the shifting political landscape brings increasing attention and action towards rights and social justice for indigenous people worldwide, a basic question is raised about an often-neglected aspect of anthropological research: what should anthropologists do with their fieldnotes when they are finished using them? Although it seems simple at first glance, the issue is in fact a complicated one, with anthropologists, archivists, and indigenous people forming a matrix of stakeholders with differing needs and obligations around research and scholarship. Anthropological records can be particularly relevant to community-based archives, because records created by anthropologists can be the earliest set of records created about a community which is only now becoming interested in its own history. Often anthropological materials form the core of a community’s archives, just as recently repatriated objects have often formed the core of a tribal or community museum’s collection, courtesy of NAGPRA legislation. The ripples created by NAGPRA have yet to dissipate, but what remains apparent is that as indigenous people become aware of the scope and volume of collections about them, they will increasingly request a place as a stakeholder in those collections.

Many thorny issues currently face archivists who are managing or appraising collections of anthropological data, fieldnotes, and researcher’s papers, and though they may look familiar, the issues at stake may be somewhat outside of the territory where archivists are comfortable, and the debates going on may be something which archivists may not adequately be prepared to face. For anthropologists, this issue is a small part of a larger imperative to make their overall research more relevant to the lives and needs of the people with whom they work. Archivists would rather err on the side of open access to materials in their collection, since the ethical guidelines of the profession tend to privilege an unrestricted flow of information which may not be appropriate to apply to information derived from an indigenous context. And for indigenous people, reclaiming and repatriating some portion of the research that has
been extracted from their culture for decades or centuries becomes a way of furthering the agenda of self-representation, sovereignty, and making good on some of the abuses of colonialism. This paper provides an overview of the issues at stake in the shifting relationship between anthropologists and archives. This analysis pays particular attention to the implications for archives and archivists and argues for adaptations to current archival practice in order to better address the needs of indigenous people who so often are the subjects of sensitive and invasive anthropological archival holdings.

The issues that arise when considering the disposition and secondary use of anthropological records fall into two general areas. The first has to do with how anthropologists perform research-- the data records that they produce are fundamentally different from other disciplines in terms of the circumstances of their creation. The methodological practices of anthropologists have very clear consequences for the second set of issues at hand, namely, the philosophical considerations around privacy, ownership, and access. The changing relationships between researchers and indigenous people have very real consequences for the archivists who later become the custodians of anthropological records. And rarely do any of the stakeholders in the matter fully understand the sometimes incommensurable needs of the other parties involved. However, what is clear is that the increasing attention to the rights of indigenous people to control and manage information about themselves is something of which archivists and anthropologists must take note with respect to disposition and access to anthropological records.

Section 1. How Anthropologists Do Their Work

At its most essential, the issue at stake with regards to the relationship between anthropology and archives is a methodological one. Participant observation and ethnography form the basis of cultural anthropology, and their primary aim as methods is to describe culture (Spradley 1980). And while anthropologists have for the most part given up on the notion that the only ethnographic work worth doing takes
place in far-flung locations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), the sorts of research materials I wish to focus on here are those produced in the ‘traditional’ model of anthropology: a researcher, (usually) white and (usually) male, travels to a distant and exotic locale to live with the ‘natives,’ learn their ways, and base his dissertation and life’s research on what he learns there.

1.1 Fieldnotes

While the theory behind ethnography is reasonably well-established, and the method of participant observation has had many decades and countless researchers to demonstrate its validity as a research method, the way that ethnographic work gets translated to written records and published texts is highly idiosyncratic. The data that an ethnographer collects are nearly always qualitative in nature, and the format that the data take is usually tailored to fit the nature of the research questions being asked. The methods used by anthropology to produce research are peculiarly unscientific for a discipline which calls itself a ‘social science,’ and this has specific ramifications for how anthropological records are handled and conceptualized once their primary use has passed. Sanjek (1990) articulates no fewer than eight possible categories of documents covered by the shorthand term ‘fieldnotes’:

- **fieldnotes proper**—elaborated descriptions, usually in a daily log format (but not as personalized as a journal or diary)
- **headnotes**—evolving outlines and understandings; more reliant on memory and analysis than observed events
- **scratch notes**—short mnemonic words or phrases, captured in the moment of observation, then expanded on or ‘written up’ later, when the anthropologist is away from the events she is trying to observe and record
- **fieldnote records**—sociological or demographic materials, questionnaires, or surveys
- **texts**—narratives or accounts spoken by informants that are dictated to the ethnographer; “the point is to secure the informant’s precise words during the fieldwork encounter, as they are spoken” (104)
- **journals and diaries**—more personal accounts, recording reactions and impressions, rarely (if ever) intended for publication or sharing with others; often a valuable tool for coping with the inevitable culture shock of ethnographic work
- **letters, reports, and papers**—documents that were written to others with the intention to ‘leave the field’; as opposed to other types of fieldnotes that were meant to stay with the researcher
• **tape transcripts**— transcripts of recorded interviews or texts; put into written words outside of the field
  (from Sanjek, “A Vocabulary for Fieldnotes,” *Fieldnotes* p. 92-121)

Unfortunately for the archivist, these categories are hardly discrete, and very few anthropologists produce all of these types of records, nor do they tend to separate them by type. What this means for the archivist is that the very personal documents within an anthropologist’s papers which were never intended for publication or access by anyone other than themselves (such as journals or diaries) may be hard to distinguish or separate from data of a more impersonal and inconsequential nature (such as fieldnote records). Moreover, due to the individualized working style and recordkeeping habits of every ethnographer, the possible secondary value that anthropological records have is unclear. Unless an anthropologist is meticulous by nature, or he is working in a context that necessitates a higher-than-normal organization of his data (for example, in collaboration with other researchers), the anthropologist’s recordkeeping habits may be so individualized and idiosyncratic that his data records are useless to future researchers.

A second factor to consider about ethnography at the level of the individual researcher is the curious lack of historicity in the field of anthropology. Kretch and Sturtevant (1995) observe that the “long anti-historical stance” of anthropology has been an key part of why the discipline is so comfortable with fieldnotes *produced by the author himself* as the only source an author draws on to back up what he is claiming. Authors get away with very few citations in published works, because they have created all the documentation they need, in the form of their own fieldnotes. However, working anthropologists are reluctant to admit that they create their own evidentiary documents (Jackson 1990). The prevalence of this practice of ‘taking one’s word for it’ is a touchy point for many researchers, and a common point of contention for critics of anthropology (especially indigenous critics). The lack of historicity in anthropology carries over into how individual researchers (mis)manage their own data, since for many years researchers have not been called upon to produce their notes as evidence in
order to prove their research claims. Therefore, anthropologists rarely think of others reading their notes as they are producing them, meaning that idiosyncratic methods of organization and management proliferate and are considered acceptable (Jackson 1990). At the core here is the fundamentally interpretive nature of ethnographic work, which is very uncomfortable for researchers who also call themselves social scientists. However, the implicit work involved in describing culture means that the interpretive nature of ethnographic work does not mean it is a bad method, it is just something that anthropologists need to admit to themselves and something to which anthropologists and archivists need to be aware. But the potential sensitivity of this issue amongst researchers makes it so that the question of access to fieldnotes does not have a simple yes or no answer.

A major consideration about fieldnotes and their disposition is that the highly individualized habits of data collection make sharing those notes with others a difficult thing for researchers to face. Jackson (1990) presents an in-depth perspective on the complex and ambivalent relationship that ethnographers have with their notes, at times possessive and secretive, at other times indifferent. She interviewed approximately seventy social scientists about their perspectives on fieldnotes. According to Jackson, a central concern that many researchers had about secondary uses of their notes was that they would be judged by subsequent generations of scholars based on the content and condition of their notes, which made many leery of sharing them or donating them to an archive. On the other hand, most of Jackson’s anthropologist interviewees were not wholly self-interested— they acknowledged the possible risk of compromising the trust of their informants. Jackson also observed that the anthropologists she interviewed were concerned about the loss of valuable primary-source information if the fieldnotes are not preserved. What is clear from her research is that ethnographers have attachments and concerns about their fieldnotes which make their donation to archives a convoluted process.

1.2 Disciplinary Crisis in Anthropology
In addition to the more personal issues which relate to the methods that individual ethnographers employ, anthropological research has been fundamentally redefined over the last few decades as the post-colonialist project finally caught up with the way anthropologists do their work. The authority previously given to ethnographic research became shaky during this time, and researchers responded by borrowing from feminist theory to create reflexive ethnography, in which the ethnographer acknowledges the impact that his or her presence has on the social situation being studied. But anthropologists still were being criticized for exploiting indigenous knowledge as just another resource for extracting from the colonies (Jaarsma 2002a). A small but growing trend of which anthropology is taking note is to ground research in the needs and agendas of the communities being researched (Russell 2006); however the legacy of anthropological research remains long and messy.

As developments in technology and communications create the phenomenon known as globalization, the lives of indigenous people who were the subjects of so much anthropological research are being fundamentally and irreconcilably altered as they increasingly come into contact with a drastically different cultural milieu. At the same time, those people are paying more attention to the research that is being done about them-- anthropologists can no longer count on what Ottenburg (1990) sardonically called the “silence of the ‘native’” in which the published work, or the fieldnotes it is derived from, go uncontested by the people that those documents are about (Ottenburg 1990, 153). Increasingly, indigenous people are paying attention, and responding to, research that is done about them (Tuhuwai Smith 1999).

Another point of consideration for the issue at hand comes from the fact that researchers working today often find themselves in locations where anthropologists from a previous era have also done research. While the conduct of those previous researchers quite possibly has an impact on how amenable the people feel towards contemporary researchers (Pandey 1972), the archived notes of a previous researcher may be invaluable to an anthropologist who is researching cultural change over time or
similar topics (Lutkehaus 1990). The work of previous researchers of course is useful for the sake of citation and background research on a particular field location, but the question remains about whether a contemporary researcher would need to access the original notes, or will their needs be satisfied by the previous anthropologists finished papers or monographs? Researchers are conflicted about whether or not it is helpful to read the work of prior scholars working in the same place (Lutkehaus 1990), and a variety of factors have to be weighed by anthropological researchers in deciding whether old fieldnotes will be valuable in answering contemporary questions. Ostensibly, this is the reason why anthropological records are kept and maintained-- in order for current and future generations of researchers to benefit from the primary research materials of the past. So it is not a simple and straightforward matter for archivists to respond to requests for the repatriation of anthropological records, but neither should those requests be dismissed for being contrary to the access-centric mission of the archives.

1.3 “You Can’t Die till You Clean Up Your Mess”

Another issue which remains central to any discussion about the place of anthropological records in archives is the fact that many researchers only think about what to do with their own data towards the end of their careers (McCutcheon 2002, Ottenburg 1990). The problem that this creates is most often a problem of scale-- a career’s worth of detailed and descriptive ethnographic data is unwieldy. While archivists are comfortable with accessioning and ingesting collections that are so large they will never have an item-level review, anthropological records are particularly problematic in this respect. The general conclusion of most scholars discussing this issue was that the researcher is best positioned to know of the existence of sensitive or objectionable material in their notes. This echoes the conclusion made by Greene (1993) on the issue of maintaining privacy in personal correspondence (i.e. that the donor is in the best position to determine the potential sensitivity of their papers). However, as

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1 The title for this section is borrowed from McCutcheon’s article about the point at which anthropologists usually begin to consider archival matters (i.e. posthumously).
discussed in more detail below, the logic of privacy may not completely accommodate the subtler and stickier issue of cultural patrimony contained within fieldnotes and research materials. One recommendation emerges throughout the various discussions of the issue at hand: the disposition of anthropological records needs to be discussed from the first, both in the training of new anthropologists and in the development of new research relationships (Jaarsma 2002a, Sanjek 1990, Kenworthy, et al. 1985).

Anthropological records are also a peculiar type of document from an archival perspective because the method of participant observation involves a delicate sort of subterfuge in order to be successful. Much has been written on the pivotal role of rapport in ethnography, where researchers are constantly moving between the roles of ‘participant’ and ‘observer’ in participant observation (Spradley 1980). To a large degree, the success of anthropological research depends on the strength of interpersonal relationships, and the ability for the researcher to make friends and put people at their ease. In some sense, ethnographic research depends on the exploitation of friendships (or at the very least, amicable acquaintances) in order to be successful. This simple oddity changes the nature of the research relationship, which also affects the nature of the data being collected. Often, as an ethnographer is doing the preliminary work of ‘getting her feet wet,’ she will get enmeshed in a community’s social milieu and dramas as she does her best to uncover the implicit aspects of culture relative to her research questions. What this means as far as records are concerned is that an anthropologist’s notes may contain some information that may be little more than gossip. This does not usually become a problem while the researcher is in control of her own notes, since depending on her proclivities she likely will keep the sensational business of the people she is working with to herself. However, when unearthed in an archives years or decades later, these details may also be potentially inflammatory and embarrassing to informants or their descendants. The same crisis in anthropology discussed above has also prompted a great deal of anxiety as to the possibly exploitative nature of the ethnographic research relationship. Therefore, how these
play out in the realm of data and physical records is a salient issue for researchers and archivists to be considering right now.

1.4 Informed Consent and Ethical Practice

This slightly problematic aspect of the anthropological research relationship also becomes a factor in the process of informed consent, which in turn affects the disposition and access to anthropological records. At the moment, nearly all research which involves the study of human beings is reviewed before the project begins by an Institutional Review Board to ensure that the rights and liberties of the participants are being upheld throughout the study. However, informed consent and ethics review is rarely a part of the research process which archivists consider, since it happens at the very beginning of the research relationship, and as discussed above, archivists come onto the scene much later in the life-cycle of the records. I would like to argue that the archive, in taking possession of anthropological records, takes on some of the ethical obligation established during the informed consent process between the researcher and the participants. Unfortunately, the ethics review process can be an exasperatingly poor fit for much of anthropological research, since it happens at the wrong time during the process of research (Fitzgerald 2005). In addition, the motivation for ethics review can be seen to be more oriented towards protecting the university or parent institution (and their federal funding sources), rather than taking a culturally-grounded approach to protecting the sensibilities of the people being studied (Tsosie 2007). Therefore, informed consent has just as much relevance to the later part of the anthropological research cycle (i.e. the ultimate fate of the data records) as it does to the early parts of the research process. My main logic is this-- because of the close, personal nature of the anthropological research relationship, much of the ethical obligation of ethnography falls on the researcher’s good judgment. However, when the researcher hands over their papers to an archive, they are no longer there to filter and distill what they wish to convey, and to do right by the people with whom they worked. Therefore, archivists need to be aware of the particular implication that the ongoing
nature of informed consent in anthropology has for anthropological records.

Overall, the research methods and recordkeeping habits of anthropologists have clear implications with respect to the changing landscape of research being done about indigenous people. The personal and idiosyncratic nature of ethnographic research, the tendency to think of the disposition of data only near the end of one’s career, and the changing dynamics of ethics and informed consent all combine to create a situation of which anthropologists and archivists must take note.

Section 2. Privacy, Ownership, and Access

The second major area of consideration when contemplating what to do with anthropological data records after the researcher is finished with them relates to the principles of privacy, ownership, and access-- most particularly how these principles are often in conflict when dealing with matters of indigenous knowledge. Discussions about the principles of privacy, ownership, and access are not new to the archival profession; however, with the introduction of documents such as the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (2007), archivists are being called upon to acknowledge the underlying assumptions that are built into currently held understandings of privacy, ownership, and access. The most important thing that archivists should be aware of relative to those assumptions is the fact that they are culturally situated, and that indigenous groups may have a very different understanding of privacy, ownership, and access for the records that are about them.

2.1 Ownership of Data, Ownership of Knowledge

At the heart of the matter is the simple question of who owns the data? Unfortunately for anthropologists and archivists, the answer is not straightforward. As culture is increasingly regarded as a discrete resource which one has, competing views of how that resource should be used prompt fierce and lasting debates (Brown 2003). Therefore, the records which help make up our understanding of culture (as documented by anthropologists) are also subject to the same debates. Also, given Western notions of property, it is not surprising that anthropological data gets
commodified when the researchers that produce it have not previously given thought to the issue of the ownership of data (Fowler 1995). Not only that, but the increasing sense of the value of cultural heritage lends weight to indigenous claims for the repatriation of ethnographic data (McCutcheon 2002, Brown 2003).

As this issue is gaining attention, a consensus is developing that the extent of an anthropologist’s ‘ownership’ of her data is limited to the interpretation that she adds to other people’s knowledge (Jaarsma 2002a). In characterizing fieldnotes and their relationship to an objective ‘fact’ or ‘truth,’ Clifford (1990) makes the distinction between *transcriptions* and *inscriptions*. *Transcriptions* are considered to be closer to what informants tell the ethnographer with a minimum of interpretation-- more like what Sanjek (1990) would characterize as ‘texts,’ as defined above. *Inscriptions* are characterized as subject to the ethnographer’s choices in what to record and what to let pass; as the ethnographer’s attention is directed to particular details and not to others, an interpretive process of filtering takes place. Using these definitions, Howard (2002) argues that *transcriptions* can be considered the property of the informant, and *inscriptions* may be the ethnographer’s to a large degree, but not completely. A similar division is used by Fowler (1995), although she extends this further by claiming that it is the raw material of observation (rather than the interpretive inscriptions) that will likely be more interesting and useful in the future. A key issue, and one of which these authors demonstrate a shifting understanding, is the extent to which researchers view ethnographic data as a process of interpretation and filtering. The more the data is perceived to be a product of the anthropologist’s intellectual effort, the more that the fieldnote records are perceived to be the property of the researcher. Sanjek (1990b) summarizes it well when he states that:

> the issue of to whom fieldnotes ultimately belong is not resolved. Their production requires local collaboration; their use, conversely, is mainly private, restricted to the ethnographer. Thorny issues of protection of informants remain, and the larger questions linger of authorship and of eventual access to cultures now lost by their immediate descendants (41).

Regardless of the question of ownership, there is a general consensus that a more
sophisticated attitude towards the ownership of anthropological records must be adopted in this particular historical moment.

An issue which impacts the sense of ownership that scholars claim to have for their research data has to do with the possible value of exclusive use of that data. Jaarsma (2002b) points out the somewhat paradoxical view that anthropologists rarely oppose the wide circulation of their published work, yet they are reluctant to share the data from which those publications are derived. He observes that:

Where research data are shielded not because of their sensitive content, but because they are the results of individual research (i.e., they have become academic capital), this can only be seen as a negative development (Jaarsma 2002b, 220).

As much as those of us in academia are reluctant to admit, academic research can be a highly competitive field, and getting the ‘scoop’ (in the journalistic sense) can be a key component of career advancement for researchers, which likely enhances their sense of possession or ownership of their data. On the other hand, exclusive use does not always have to be to the detriment of indigenous informants. Nicholas (2007) discusses the example of Bannister’s research, in which she placed a five year embargo on her ethnobotany dissertation in order for her indigenous informants to capitalize on her findings about the medicinal uses of balsam root. What is clear, however, is that academics are not used to thinking about the exclusive use of their data, and how that impacts notions of ownership.

In addition, a sometimes unsavory issue that academics also have to face is the claims of ownership of the products of research that funding agencies are increasingly claiming (McCutcheon 2002, Tsosie 2007). The fact that research gets funded by organizations that may have less-than-philanthropic motives is in some ways a skeleton in academia’s closet. Increasingly, funding agencies are claiming an interest in the disposition of the data records being produced as a result of the research they are funding (McCutcheon 2002). Furthermore, in the case of federally funded research, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) can be leveraged to gain access to research
materials that might otherwise be restricted by the researcher in charge, either intentionally at the request of her informants, or inadvertently by residing in an office filing cabinet (McCutcheon 2002). Moreover, the prevalence of ethnographic research being done by private and commercial firms, such as in the domain of bioprospecting, further complicates the problem of what to do with data records, since the economic gain that is possible to derive from the content of the records is indisputable (Guy 2002). Right now research agendas with regards to indigenous people are being critically reexamined (Tuhiwai Smith 1999), and what is clear is that as those agendas are revised, the disposition of the research products, data, and anthropological records will become an issue that is impossible to ignore.

By way of a solution to the ownership issue, many have argued in favor of regarding indigenous knowledge as intellectual property in order to employ protections on the information that has been extracted from indigenous people for so many years. Unfortunately, a more in-depth discussion of the legal and ethical ramifications of this perspective is a bit out of scope here (see Brown 2003 for just such a discussion). However, a few points relevant to archives ought to be made. First of all, the main sensibility in regards to whether indigenous knowledge can be considered intellectual property is that the current definitions of intellectual property do not accommodate notions of collectively-held knowledge. Most intellectual property litigation has to demonstrate a tangible harm to the prosecuting party, and unfortunately for indigenous people, a definition of harm to cultural beliefs and sensibilities has yet to be established in an effective way (Tsosie 2007). The challenges that archives face in regards to intellectual property and protecting unpublished works are multiplied in the case of indigenous knowledge held within the archive.

One solution to the problems outlined so far has been to consider repatriating the material in question. The flurry of activity in matters of indigenous cultural heritage in the United States that was set off by the passage of NAGPRA has finally spilled over into archives, as evidenced by the development of the timely Protocols for Native
American Archival Materials (2007). Part of a growing trend within cultural repositories, the Protocols herald a state of affairs where archivists can no longer privilege a widely-defined “public” while ignoring the particular needs of the community which is the subject of anthropological records. However, as is the case with the NAGPRA-mandated return of objects and remains, repatriation of anthropological archival materials is neither simple nor straightforward.

Repatriation appears to be a viable solution to the problem of sensitive anthropological data in the archives, since public access to certain elements of information and knowledge can be directly in conflict with indigenous values of privacy and sacredness. As laid out by Jaarsma (2002a), a wide range of activities can be covered by the shorthand term ‘repatriation’—a spectrum of activities between simply sending back the final article or thesis all the way to sending back every item of notes, diaries, and recordings made in the field. Also, besides just providing physical access to repatriated materials, intellectual access must also be ensured (Tuhuwai Smith 1999, Counts and Counts 2002). Speaking more towards working anthropologists, Jaarsma (2002a) describes the challenge of intellectual access because “academic anthropology has increasingly engaged in a conversation with itself “(7). The intellectual distance between anthropological discourse and everyday language has widened such that the informants with whom anthropologists work may be baffled and perplexed at what has been written about them. This becomes relevant to archival practice when one considers that the archivist may be the only person on hand to decipher cryptic texts or fieldnotes on behalf of indigenous patrons, making an already intimidating experience that much more difficult on the part of the indigenous patron (Hanlon 1999).

Several notable examples demonstrating the importance of the repatriation of anthropological archival materials have emerged in recent years. First of all, there is the aforementioned Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, which aim to be a gentler and more collaborative approach to repatriation than NAGPRA was (Nason and Boneparte 2007). The Protocols have only recently been developed, and so their
influence has yet to be widely felt. However, they clearly will have a deeply-felt impact on archival practice in the United States. Another example of repatriation within the archives is the ongoing *Trust and Technology* project at Monash University in Australia (Russell 2005). One of many innovative indigenous archival projects in Australia, *Trust and Technology* asks first *if* archival records are something that Australian Aboriginal people are interested in, then *how* access to those records will be developed in a culturally-appropriate manner. Another relevant example is outlined by Howard (2002), who established a digital archive of anthropological records about Rotuma, an island in Micronesia. The primary rationale for a digital archive (as opposed to a physical one) was primarily in the logistics-- the tropical climate and limited resources of the island made a physical archives unfeasible, while the transnational and urban existence of many Rotumans meant that they had access to the World Wide Web and the inclination to use a digital archives (Howard 2002). In addition, the Aγa Iγitija project is another notable example where technology is being applied to the repatriation of archival materials in a culturally appropriate manner. Christen (2006) describes the workstations developed by the Aγa Iγitija team which allows for digital access in very remote locations in rural Australia, but which eschews the networked model currently popular with many technology developers in favor of a secure database which satisfies local notions of privileged access to information based on location, status, and age (Christen 2006). All of these examples serve as evidence of the increasing relevance which anthropological data have for the people which those data are about.

### 2.2 The Question of Appropriate Access

A primary problem which has yet to be resolved is centered around conflicting sensibilities about appropriate access. Archivists are trained with ethical principles which privilege open access and the free circulation of information, based within Western epistemologies which equate free inquiry with the ideals of democracy (Becvar 2007). The following excerpt from the SAA *Code of Ethics for Archivists* defines an ethical
stance on access:

Archivists strive to promote open and equitable access to their services and the records in their care without discrimination or preferential treatment, and in accordance with legal requirements, cultural sensitivities, and institutional policies (SAA Code of Ethics 2005).

Despite the emphasis that archival practice places on the free circulation of information, archivists are increasingly paying attention to the attitudes held by indigenous people about the appropriate circulation of information, which often places limitations on knowledge based on an individual’s gender, clan heritage or affiliation, age, or status (Christen 2006). The aforementioned Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (2007) discusses the incompatibilities between the different perceptions of the appropriate circulation and ownership of knowledge:

Archivists and librarians taught to champion intellectual freedom and unfettered access to resources may be troubled by the notion that in Native American and other indigenous communities, knowledge can be collectively owned and that access to some knowledge may be restricted as a privilege rather than a right (Protocols 2007).

The discomfort that information professionals feel when first confronted with the idea that knowledge restriction may be appropriate in some cases, and in others mandatory, pales in comparison to the continued marginalization of indigenous people worldwide—satisfying their requests for restricted access is merely a small step on the road towards reconciliation.

Within the literature that discusses the relationship between anthropology and archives, the interest in culturally-appropriate restrictions on access to knowledge derived from research has only really developed within the last twenty years. Before then, the primary interest in restricting access to anthropological data records had to do with protecting the privacy of the informants (Ellen 1984). Archivists are familiar with protecting the privacy of the people who are named and/or implicated in records (Green 1993); however, archivists would have to be extremely knowledgeable in order to fully understand what sorts of information may constitute a violation of privacy for someone from another culture. At its core, the issue has to do with private matters
being transformed into something public (Fowler 1995), but the added complication of varying notions of privacy in different cultures makes the issue that much more difficult. Cross-cultural understandings of privacy places a heavy burden on the archivist to discern what might be considered damaging to someone from another culture (Fowler 1995).

Other issues arise when considering the issue of restricting access to anthropological data records. As a rule, archivists prefer to have open access to all users of the archive, so that limitations stipulated by donors or the subjects of the records are sometimes unwelcome and hard to administer. Several examples exist where archivists have had to deal with access restrictions based on the status of users— for example, the ethnicity, religion, or intended use of the materials (McCutcheon 2002). Besides being ridiculously difficult to enforce, in all likelihood restrictions like this are quite possibly illegal. On the other hand, layers of restriction are appropriate in many cases with regards to indigenous knowledge, and repatriation is a good solution to making sure that culturally-appropriate access takes place. Issac (2005) discusses a good example of the repatriation of a photographic collection to the Zuni in New Mexico. After receiving a copy of all photographs relating to the Zuni at the National Anthropology Archives at the Smithsonian Institution, a group of respected individuals in the tribe vetted the collection, and those images that were perceived as showing sensitive or esoteric imagery were moved to the Zuni Historic Preservation Office where access is restricted to initiated members of the appropriate religious societies (Issac 2005).

Often, limiting access until a certain amount of time has passed is a popular solution to the possible risks to privacy contained within records. However, an assumption about the nature of time and its passage is fundamentally a part of this practice— it is assumed that the damage caused by information being publicly accessible will be lessened by the passage of time. While this may sufficient for privacy risks as conceptualized in Western thought, time and its passage is culturally constituted.
Russell (2004) discusses her personal experience with medical records about members of her own family, accessible after a period of 100 years, which is not very long within Aboriginal tradition. She states that “even in 500 years, I do not want just anyone to be able to read the ‘treatments’ to which my family were subjected” (Russell 2004, 4).

Overall, what emerges is an understanding of the Western-centric perspective inherent in archival practice (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007). Archivists have yet to develop a broad understanding of the nature of the harm that unrestricted access can do, and unfortunately, the nature of cultural harm in general has yet to be characterized or fully understood (Tsosie 2007). Unfortunately for indigenous people, the stance of archives with respect to restrictions on anthropological data is usually reactive rather than proactive—only after the harm takes place is something done to prevent further harm (Fowler 1995). The stakes may not be high enough for there to be a legal mandate with respect to anthropological records (Krech and Sturtevant 1995), but the need for ethical mandates, and above all collaboration, is vividly apparent. The best solution to the myriad of problems of access and restrictions on access is likely going to be a combination of what scholars hold themselves to and the policies that archivists maintain. If the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (2007) are widely adopted amongst archives which house collections of Native American materials, then the balance in matters of access will likely shift towards stricter policies. Or, quite possibly, the materials in question will be subject to the “disappearing acts” that Phillips (2005) describes in relation to the repatriation of Iroquois “False Face” masks. In any case, it is clear that archivists are moving into a new phase of professional practice with respect to anthropological archival collections.

Conclusion

While at first glance, the issue at hand might seem to be merely a matter of the professional habits of anthropologists. However, because archival collections hold the raw material from which history is fashioned (Hanlon 1999), we can see why indigenous people are taking such a strong interest in archival holdings that relate to
them. Jaarsma (2002a) defines the issue quite succinctly when he states:

“though we can talk in theory about self-determination of indigenous peoples, this goal can only be reached by giving the people we study the ability to assess the nature of the information we gather and the methods we have used to gather it (11).”

The best possible solution is for anthropologists and archivists to take a proactive stance in negotiating the disposition of ethnographic data. For researchers, this involves discussions with informants and collaborators from the very beginning of the research project—developing memorandums of understanding when negotiating the terms of the research relationship. For archivists, a proactive stance is twofold. First of all, archivists would be advised to review current collections for possible candidates for repatriation (per the Protocols recommendations). In doing so, the archivist’s best course of action is to open a dialogue with the community or communities in question to discuss in a collaborative and sensitive way what should be done with the records. Second, archivists can take care when accessioning new anthropological collections to ensure that the researcher has discussed the issue of the disposition of their notes with their informants and collaborators. Above all else, for all involved, the task at hand is to create an agenda of sensitive collaboration and patient negotiation.
Works Cited


