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Archival Decolonization and Buffalo Restoration as Acts of Native American Cultural Reclamation

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ABSTRACT

Much research has been done exploring how settler archivists working in institutions occupying Indigenous land can involve Native peoples in the care of their archival materials. Similarly, there has been much scholarship exploring the causes of the near extinction of the North American bison and its reintroduction to its native habitat. Both practices are important for Native communities who seek to rebuild families, histories, and lifeways that were forcefully taken from them upon contact with European nations. However, no one has yet looked at these practices in relation to one another, as methods by which culture is restored to its people. These two cultural reclamation practices share many similarities, including focuses on stewardship and relationship building, and face similar difficulties in funding, access, and outreach. Archives should pay attention to, and emulate, how Native tribes speak to their communities to ensure that all voices are heard.

KEYWORDS

decolonization, archives, buffalo, cultural reclamation, Native Americans

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Introduction

Diving deep into the research regarding the near extermination of the North American Plains bison in the late nineteenth century, it becomes clearer with every word that the buffalo and the Indian have shared a similar fate throughout history at the hands of settlers and the United States government, from calf-napping enacted by early bison conservationists to build their herds to the limitation of the lands on which buffalo were and are permitted to roam. The intent of this paper is not to compare Native American people with buffalo, but rather to examine the way in which Native people and Native culture have been disrupted by colonialism, and to draw parallels between efforts to address and reverse these harmful practices. As an archivist, I noticed further parallels between the efforts to restore buffalo to the Great Plains in the United States and the ongoing efforts to decolonize Native American archival materials. This paper explores some of the similarities and difficulties shared by these two cultural heritage restoration practices.

This research is grounded in my personal experience as an archivist working with physical and digital documents and records in an archival setting rather than material objects in a museum context. Museums are often fraught with many of the issues I discuss throughout this paper, but as that is not my expertise, I have opted to focus on archives and leave museums out of the conversation for now. Similarly, buffalo – and many Indigenous tribes – are not bounded by modern-day colonially imposed borders. This research is situated in the context of the history of the United States. Historically, however, buffalo roamed north into Canada and south into Mexico (Buffalo Field Campaign, n.d.). Readers outside the United States may find it helpful to research how local Indigenous peoples care for the land and the beings who live on it for regional practices that may be applied in an archival context.

This paper begins by providing an overview of the literature related to Native American archives and the damage removing knowledge from its cultural context can do to communities. It situates Native archival materials within the broader context of colonialism and emphasizes the importance of involving Native peoples in the processing and description of archives that describe their families and cultures. It then moves to a discussion of the literature related to the near destruction of the North American Great Plains bison and the efforts on the part of both Natives and settlers to restore the buffalo population to its prior numbers. This section ends by assessing the varying scholarly theories as to the cause of the extensive hunting of buffalo in the late nineteenth century and evaluates the importance of buffalo restoration to modern day Native American tribes.

Next, I provide definitions for three terms: settler colonialism, extractive colonialism, and ecological imperialism. I use these definitions as a framework for analyzing how settler colonialism and extractive colonialism worked together to encourage the colonization not only of Native lands but also of Native thought, taking information about Native peoples and

repurposing it to support the narrative of the colonizer. This section links the removal of Native knowledge and the hunting of the buffalo as acts of extractive colonialism and applies the idea of multiple forces working together to colonize a place, as in ecological imperialism, to connect the removal of knowledge and the removal of buffalo as tools of the colonizer against Native Americans.

The next section looks at the ideas of custodianship, wherein a person or institution takes sole and total ownership of something, and stewardship, where a person or institution works together with others to ensure that proper care is taken with items that are important to all stakeholders. It reflects on the shift in values from custodianship to stewardship within the archival field and reviews ways in which archivists are enacting good stewardship principles with regards to Native archival materials. It then moves to custodianship and stewardship within buffalo restoration, beginning with a discussion of the motivations of the keepers of early captive buffalo herds and moving to the modern Native emphasis on treating buffalo as closely to their natural state as possible.

Next, I examine the importance of relationship building in archives, with a focus on steps archivists should take when reaching out to Native communities about upcoming or retrospective reparative projects. I explore why these relationships are important to build, not just within the scope of a project, but in the long term, before turning to the historical relationship of Native peoples with buffalo and how that has translated into current buffalo restoration projects on Native reservations.

The final section of this paper compares these two cultural heritage restoration practices. It investigates the shared difficulties both practices face, including a lack of funding for consistent staffing – often resulting in a loss of institutional knowledge – and the struggle to provide access and outreach programming to the public to increase the visibility of these two decolonial activities. It ends with a discussion of how buffalo restoration and archival decolonization contribute to the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in the United States.

This paper draws parallels between the value of stewardship over custodianship and the power of relationship building in both decolonial archival practice and buffalo restoration programs. It argues that archivists should acknowledge that Native cultures hold value beyond increasing the profile of colonial archival institutions and that archivists should be more involved in helping Native peoples reclaim their stolen cultural heritage. This paper further compares the similarities and difficulties faced by practitioners of these two decolonial acts to draw the attention of non-Native archivists to the lessons that can be learned from buffalo restoration programs. This will, I hope, create more empathy and compassion in archivists and encourage them to provide assistance to Native peoples navigating archives and to advocate for decolonial archival practices in their positions.

Much research has been done exploring how settler archivists working in institutions occupying Indigenous land can involve Native peoples in the arrangement and description of their archival materials. Similarly, there has been much scholarship exploring the causes of the near extinction of the North American bison and its reintroduction to its native habitat. Both practices are important for Native communities who are seeking to rebuild families, histories, and lifeways that were forcefully taken from them upon contact with European nations. However, no one has yet looked at these two practices in relation to one another, as methods by which culture is restored to its people.

Literature Review

Archives

For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to situate the archives of Native American tribes and nations within the colonial climate of their creation. Citing Stuart Hall, Māori researcher and professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) explains how the West functions as a concept that allows Westerners to classify, represent, compare, and evaluate other societies, upholding European society and its Enlightenment ideals as the standard to which all others must measure (pp. 49-50). This definition of the West explains why the vast majority of archives related to Indigenous peoples were created by colonizers: Indigenous peoples had no need to study themselves, but colonizers were driven by the desire to classify and catalog new ideas that did not fit into their worldview. Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey (2023) echo Schwartz and Cook (2002), who posit that "archives are social constructs. Their origins lie in the information needs and social values of the rulers…who establish and maintain them" (p. 9). Antoinette Burton (2005) makes the important point that "archives do not simply arrive or emerge fully formed" (p. 6), but are "created, selected, and described by humans and as such are subject to human fallibility" (p. 20). Thus, non-Native archives have historically divorced information collected about Indigenous peoples from their cultural contexts to uphold the colonial order. In his 1978 article "Archival Captive–The American Indian," William T. Hagan reminds his readers that many government records in the United States were created to assist with the subjugation of Native Americans and to depict their white authors as well-performing employees, specifically mentioning reports from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which served the United States government rather than the people they were actually about (pp. 136-137).

Vina Begay and Kelley M. Klor (2024) challenge the colonial idea of provenance, which prioritizes a single – usually white – creator of archival collections, advocating instead for Native archival collections to be arranged and described based on "the values of the community of origin, such as relationality and reciprocity" (p. 612). They argue that imposing colonial provenance on collections depicting Native Americans strips the materials of historical and relational context that result in difficulties when a tribe tries to access materials about itself. However, Begay and Klor argue that working with each tribal nation depicted in an archive to

create a provenance that acknowledges holistic Indigenous knowledge systems can improve access and use by Native peoples, thereby allowing these cultures to not only be preserved, but potentially reintegrated into modern life.

Drawing on her doctoral research, Aboriginal Australian archivist and scholar Kirsten Thorpe (2024) reinforces the imperative need for "the redistribution of power in the archives and the need for dismantling dominant archival practices and approaches" through building "reciprocal relationships" to support Indigenous spiritual and emotional well-being (p. 126). This includes providing Indigenous peoples who may be subjects of a colonial archive the agency to make decisions about the preservation and description of archival materials, thereby giving "voice and recognition of their views and experiences" (p. 138).

Involving Indigenous peoples in the handling of archival material about them, their families, and their cultures also plays an important role in helping them reclaim their cultural heritage. McCracken and Hogan-Stacey (2023) explore how "decentering the power of the archivists" (p. 46) by involving Indigenous peoples in describing their records is an important step in the decolonization of archives. They also discuss how reorganizing or creating digital archives – where record order is malleable – can remove the archives from their inherent colonial structure and instead center the Indigenous user. Thorpe (2019) emphasizes the importance of allowing Indigenous people to speak back to archives, advocating for the inclusion of multiple perspectives rather than just the single perspective of the European colonizer, and the need to consider the rights Indigenous peoples hold to colonial archives to fill in or correct records (pp. 45-46). This, in effect, returns agency to Indigenous ancestors through "recording and updating the context of the historical materials held in the colonial archives" (Thorpe, 2024, p. 139). McCracken and Hogan-Stacey (2023) agree, noting that Indigenous peoples should be able to identify the information that is important to their communities and individuals within those communities (p. 52). Drawing on the writings of Vine Deloria, Jr., Jennifer R. O'Neal (2015) posits that "information and knowledge are critical to the sovereignty and self-determination of Native nations" (p. 3). Making space for Native Americans to speak back to and reclaim their rights over colonial collections also allows them to recontextualize information that may have been lost when it was taken from them, thereby reinvigorating their culture.

Buffalo

Many scholars have provided differing explanations as to what eventually led to the near extinction of the buffalo in the late nineteenth century. Environmental historian Andrew Isenberg (2000) takes a holistic view, analyzing social, economic, and environmental causes of this event. Among these causes are the introduction of horses to America, which, in conjunction with the easy spread of European diseases throughout Native villages, led many tribes of Plains Indians to give up subsistence farming and turn to nomadism and a sole reliance on buffalo as a

food source, thereby reducing their ecological safety net; the introduction of cattle to the Great Plains, which resulted in a scarcity of food and land for bison; and a greater call for leather to be made into belts caused by industrialization, which led to overhunting by both Natives and settlers. Ken Zontek (2007) pushes back against the idea that Natives were partially responsible for the demise of the bison, advocating for Native Americans to be absolved of any guilt related to this near-extinction event because of their efforts historically and in the present day to restore the buffalo nation to its homeland (p. 152). Meanwhile, M. Taylor Scott (2011), a scholar of economics, argues that international trade played a key role in the extermination process, and identifies three key factors in the increased demand for buffalo hides:

> (i) a price for buffalo products that was largely invariant to changes in supply; (ii) open access conditions with no regulation of the buffalo kill; and (iii) a newly invented tanning process that made buffalo hides into valuable commercial leather. (p. 3193)

Lastly, David D. Smits (1994) places blame at the feet of Generals William Sherman and Philip Sheridan, who he claims used the tactics they learned through their service in the American Civil War to deprive Plains Indians of their primary food source to force them onto reservations.

Efforts to preserve the bison began even while the extermination was ongoing. Zontek (2007) traces five herds, established in the late nineteenth century, that would go on to become the seed herds for several buffalo preserves. Two of these herds belonged to white settlers, one to a Canadian First Nations man, and two to Native American families. Zontek (2007) examines the reasons behind each herds' creation, pointing out that the settlers tended toward more capitalist motivations while the Indigenous conservationists were much more focused on communalism and restoring the bison to perpetuate their culture. Isenberg (2000) traces the American Bison Society, an early twentieth century organization of Euroamericans aimed at preserving the bison as an homage to "the imagined, masculine frontier culture" (p. 168) of the American West. This group helped establish a herd of domestic bison in Yellowstone National Park, which kept in line with their primary motivations of restoring the buffalo not for environmental reasons, but for profit. The bison they preserved were thus "a curiosity, tourist attraction, target for hunters, and domesticated beast[s]" (Isenberg, 2000, p. 192).

Zontek (2007) describes the period between the dissolution of the American Bison Society in the 1930s and the establishment of the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) in 1991, during which Native Americans worked to maintain buffalo herds on their reservations. However, due to suspected disease and contact between cattle and buffalo, the American government forced some tribes, including the Crow Agency and the Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation, to eradicate their entire herds in the 1960s (p. 68). The ITBC provided a visible organization through which Native Americans could present a unified stance on the reintroduction of buffalo to the Great Plains. Tribal herds are treated with respect and are central to the goals of increasing tribal spirituality, culture, economic development, and ecology (Shamon et al., 2022).

Settler Colonialism, Extractive Colonialism, and Ecological Imperialism

Several important terms come into play to make clear the connection between archives and buffalo. In "A Typology of Colonialism," Nancy Shoemaker (2015) identifies twelve different types of colonialism. This section will focus on two of these, settler colonialism and extractive colonialism, and will then introduce the idea of ecological imperialism as a parallel factor.

Settler colonialism is perhaps the most familiar version of colonialism to many people in the English-speaking world due to the vast span of the British Empire over the centuries. In this form of colonialism, settlers enter a country and claim land as their own, forcing the native inhabitants to move again and again as the settler consumes more and more space. Shoemaker (2015) points out that settlers "attempt to engineer the disappearance of the original inhabitants everywhere except in nostalgia." This rings especially true for Native Americans, who were considered a vanishing race by settlers of the American West. As a result of this mindset, settler anthropologists created records about Native peoples that often portrayed them as mythological figures rather than human beings. No consideration was given to what the Natives wanted to preserve about themselves, likely because the settler researchers believed the Natives would not be present to protest the way settlers presented them historically. Settlers took custody of languages, sacred objects, songs, and stories without thought about how this would affect the originating Native communities, and created vast collections of field notes, photographs, and other archival materials that depict the Native through the colonial gaze. These collections are now found in the archival collections of universities, museums, tribal libraries and archives, and other information centers, often removed from their Indigenous cultural contexts.

I propose that the creation of these collections of materials about Native peoples is, in themselves, an act of extractive colonialism. In extractive colonialism, the colonizers remove raw material from a landscape or people to enrich themselves. There is no reason this raw material cannot be information. Because settlers were actively committing genocide against Native Americans through westward expansion and forced relocation, extracting information from Native peoples allowed colonizers to twist it to further their own purposes. The white researcher could superimpose their own ideas about the Natives in their research onto the materials they gathered and created. This understanding of Native cultures was therefore considered to be "correct" – especially if it came from the white academy – and was proliferated through citations of these settler-generated "facts" about Native peoples, even seeping into the common understanding of what it means to be Native American. Hence, the common – and false – portrayal of Native Americans persists in media to this day as bloodthirsty, uncivilized, brutal and, notably, extinct.

In her article, Shoemaker (2015) specifically mentions buffalo hides as an example of a highly sought after raw material in American extractive colonialism. This links Native archives and buffalo as products, perhaps even victims, of extractive colonialism. Removing archival

materials from their Native communities and nearly removing buffalo from the face of the North American continent both served as tools of the colonizer to keep Native Americans under the control of the United States government. To the U.S. Army and Congress, killing buffalo was the best way to cut Plains Indians off from their primary source of supplies, which would force them to turn to reservations to survive. It also served as a way to annihilate them altogether (Smits, 1994, p. 317), allowing settlers to fully domesticate the West. Removal of archives and artifacts from tribes also effectively removed the means of practicing certain aspects of their spiritual lives, especially when considered alongside Indian residential schools, where children were removed from their families, cultures, and tribal lands and taught to speak, dress, and act like the settlers. This removed the knowledge of ancestral languages and practices from entire generations of Native children, knowledge that many Native nations are still struggling to regain.

Like the idea of extractive colonialism, but with an emphasis on ecology, is Alfred W. Cosby's term ecological imperialism. Ecological imperialism is a process through which "Old World microbes, plants, animals, and people often accomplished their conquests in concert" (Isenberg, 2000, p. 32) By applying this idea that multiple aspects of imperialism can act together to definitively replace the Native inhabitants of a place, it becomes clear how the removal of knowledge and the removal of buffalo had similar effects on Native Americans, wearing down their minds and bodies, respectively, under the heel of the settler. Decolonizing Native archives and restoring buffalo to Native lands are acts reclaiming cultural practices that were forcefully and often violently removed from Native reach.

From Custodianship to Stewardship

In the archival field, it is often said that we are in a post-custodial era. Indeed, the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) Code of Ethics lists "Responsible Stewardship" as a core value. However, as recently as 2019, this value was listed instead as "Responsible Custody." Custodianship, according to SAA, involves making defensible decisions for the collections in an archivist's holdings that balance the needs of all stakeholders, with an emphasis on retaining the "most essential or useful materials" (Society of American Archivists, 2011). Stewardship, on the other hand, is based in an ethic of care, adapting archival processes to meet the needs and suggestions of all stakeholders, and distributing archival resources ethically. Stewardship has a focus on transparency that custodianship lacks (Society of American Archivists, 2020).

Accepting an archival collection into a repository typically includes a deed of gift, wherein the donor signs ownership of and legal rights to the collection to the repository, giving the archive full authority to "the right to use the archives freely, the right to exclude others from using it, and the right to manage, sell, give, or abandon it" (Light, 2019, p. 7). This is still common practice, but greater attention is now paid to the communities documented within a collection and their rights over the information contained within it, which has led many

archivists to think of themselves less as custodians of a collection, a concept which is often connected with the donor, and more as stewards of collections who must balance the rights the archives holds over a collection with the human rights of the collection's subjects. Additionally, donors who are not the creators of a collection, but simply people with enough money to bring many items on a similar topic together who then give their collection to an institution, are paid a great deal of attention with the hopes of receiving more monetary support. There is a delicate balance archivists must strike between making sure the donor is happy and honoring the rights of the collection's subjects.

Custodianship has a long history in the archival profession. It was articulated as a core archival value by Sir Hilary Jenkinson, an early pioneer of archival theory, in his 1922 work *A Manual of Archive Administration*. Jenkinson placed a great deal of emphasis on the proof of an archives' veracity through its passing through an unbroken chain of custodians. Because he was writing in the 1920s, however, and archival science was still in its infancy at the time, Jenkinson was writing primarily with the archives of administration in mind, for example, the archive of government offices and corporations that had an innate structure, rather than the archives of a community of people. He believed that the original creator of a collection of records would decide what needed to be preserved and pass those documents on to their professional successor, who would pass them on to the following successor, and so on. It is arguable that, in this instance, custodianship was the correct choice because the records were not of personal importance but rather of professional importance, and so it would be up to the newest successor to decide the arrangement of the records that would best benefit their style of work.

The shift to accepting stewardship as a valid framework for archivists has occurred in concert with a greater emphasis on the collection of the stories of regular people, beginning with Howard Zinn's 1970 address at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting, where he made plain the silences that had existed in archives up to that point by calling for archivists to "compile a whole new world of documentary materials, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people" (Zinn, 1977, p.2), in direct opposition to the concentration on the records of popular or well-known figures up to that point. Stewardship has begun to flourish with the wide proliferation of community archives, and institutional archives are integrating practices that are more in line with stewardship into their workflows. In particular, participatory archiving has grown in importance when considering the archives of Indigenous peoples.

Participatory archiving is a way of crowdsourcing information about a collection from the originating community, even if that community was not the one who gathered or donated the collection to an institution. Often occurring in a digital environment, Native users can add tags and annotations to objects that provide cultural context, and in some cases have the option of restricting access to items that contain sacred materials so that they are available only to members of the tribe who have permission to view that material. Several bespoke technological solutions, such as Mukurtu and Local Contexts, have been built by non-Native archival

institutions in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to ensure that these communities have the level of control over their archival materials that they want.

Mukurtu (n.d.) is a collection management system that allows for Indigenous peoples to assign granular levels of access to sacred material, add multiple perspectives and records to digital items, and assign labels to Traditional Knowledge (TK) to denote Indigenous knowledge in third party and public domain materials. Writing about the original Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari digital archive built for the Warumungu people in Australia, developer Kimberly Christen (2012) notes the "anguish over the violation of cultural protocols observed by Warumungu people in the distribution, circulation, and reproduction of cultural materials and knowledge" (p. 2885) held in the Australian National Archives. The Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari digital archive, which was used as the basis for the later development of the Mukurtu CMS, allowed Indigenous users to identify themselves by their relationships – "community, individual, familial, clan, ancestral" (p. 2887) – in the system, and then be granted access only to the cultural materials that aligned with their community status as defined by tribal elders in the back-end of the system. In this way, Mukurtu was configured with "social norms concerning the creation, reproduction, and distribution of knowledge within the community" (p. 2885) in mind.

Growing out of Mukurtu's TK labels, Local Contexts (n.d.) is a project that allows libraries, archives, and other information centers to label Indigenous knowledge within their holdings. Having information provided by the Native community side by side with metadata created by a historic or current non-Native archivist allows the archives to acknowledge the harmful language or other harmful description that was used in the past while remediating that harm by ensuring accurate descriptions are available to users directly from the Native community in question. TK labels also encourage users to "think about how [they] are going to use this material and to respect different cultural values and expectations about circulation and use" (Christen, 2015, p. 18). Christen notes that Local Contexts works directly with tribes to create customized labels and discusses Local Contexts' work with the Musqueam Indian Band (MIB) in Vancouver, Canada as a case study. Local Contexts worked with Musqueam elders to draft the text of each label, then stepped back to allow the draft text to circulate through the band's Treaties, Lands, and Resources staff, Cultural Council, and General Council. In this way, Local Contexts "respect[s] the MIB's own protocols" (p. 17) around cultural content and avoids forcing non-Indigenous beliefs about the text of the label upon the band. Instituting measures such as TK labels makes all users aware when the materials they use stem from Indigenous ideas, ensuring proper credit is given to those communities and users are informed when and why material may be restricted.

The tension between custodianship and stewardship emerges as well in the preservation and restoration of buffalo in North America since the late nineteenth century. As previously mentioned, both settler and Native families raised buffalo herds to preserve the species but for very different reasons, with settlers focused more on using the herds for economic gain and

Natives focused on preserving them for cultural purposes. This tension maps easily onto the custodianship/stewardship dichotomy, with settlers taking on the role of custodians of buffalo and Natives taking on the stewardship role. Rancher Charles Goodnight and former buffalo hunter Charles Jesse "Buffalo" Jones, both settlers, spent a huge amount of money attempting to breed a cattle-buffalo hybrid whose meat would bring in a higher price than beef from cattle. Goodnight also received a considerable amount of money from products derived from his captive buffalo herd, as they jumped in value as the species died out in the wild (Zontek, 2007, pp. 39-40).

The American Bison Society, a largely Euroamerican enterprise, also viewed the bison as an economic tool in addition to serving as a symbol of the dying American frontier. They did not imagine an America where bison could continue to roam freely as they had done in years past, but as a contained species that only existed in previously designated areas such as wildlife preserves, where tourists could come to experience the West as it had once been (Zontek, 2007, p. 147). This huge limitation on a previously wild animal species mirrors the treatment of Native peoples by settlers to a chilling degree, reminding one of Indian reservations where Native Americans could be controlled and contained. Many Native people note this parallel, including Lakota holy man John Fire Lame Deer, who said, "If brother buffalo could talk, he would say, 'They put me on a reservation like the Indians.' In life and death we and the buffalo have always shared the same fate" (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1972, as cited in Zontek, 2007, p. 66). C. Wolf Smoke similarly explained, "We evolved from the bison, we used to be bison" (Zontek, 2007, p. 3). Even up to the present day, the bison herd who range, supposedly freely, in Yellowstone National Park are shot by park personnel when they cross outside the park's borders, and many Native Americans see this treatment as a reflection of their own plight (Zontek, 2007, p. xv).

Two Native American families established captive buffalo herds in the late nineteenth century as well: Samuel Walking Coyote and his wife Sabine in Montana in the 1870s, and Frederick Dupuis and his wife Good Elk Woman in South Dakota in the 1880s.[1] Walking Coyote and Sabine hunted together with their teenage son to capture bison to bring to their village as a way to ask for forgiveness following a dispute related to Walking Coyote's infidelity. Their community was heavily involved in caring for the bison and looked forward to calving season every year (Zontek, 2007, pp. 45-48). Dupuis and Good Elk Woman also hunted alongside their families and other visitors, although Zontek (2007) does not state if their community took part in caring for their herd (pp. 48-51). These two families made no effort to gain economically from their buffalo but rather created the herds communally with their families.

[1] Although it is outside the scope of this article, a study of the gendered differences between the involvement of Native women and that of the wives of settlers in the creation of these herds would be fascinating, especially when tied in to Isenberg's (2000) idea of the "imagined, masculine frontier culture" (p. 168) of the American West alongside the Native American view of the role of women, especially in matriarchal tribes.

In direct contrast to the limitation placed on surviving bison populations by settler preservationists, the InterTribal Buffalo Council desires to treat buffalo not as livestock but as wildlife, "that is, with minimal manipulation, in order to take care of the land" (Zontek, 2007, p. 80) and its people. Shamon et al. (2022) explain that bison are an "ecological keystone species," meaning they have "a disproportionately large influence on their environment relative to their abundance" (p. 4). Reintroducing bison to the Great Plains can help the land begin to heal by returning it to a state from before it was portioned into plots to support farming and ranching. Modern day Native bison herds are used for both commercial and cultural purposes, serving as an educational connection to Native rituals, history, and spirituality, and as an alternative means of meat production. Having a local source of food is particularly beneficial for reservations that are otherwise food insecure. Tribes also gain economically by selling buffalo meat outside the reservation and by offering hunters the opportunity to pay to hunt bison when the herd needs to be culled. Although this straddles the line between the original seed herd owners' motivations, with economic gain on one side and cultural preservation on the other, the care Native peoples take with their bison herds, and their commitment to interacting with them as wildlife as much as possible, mark them as clear stewards of the bison, the land, and their people.

Relationship Building

Building relationships with populations that have been historically excluded from archival processes is an integral step in remediating the harm done by colonial archives and ensuring that marginalized voices are included in the archival record. Especially given the twentieth century notion of archivists as neutral figures who bring no biases to their work, but are objective purveyors and protectors of "truth," it is easy for modern day archivists to believe they know best and only need to consult other stakeholders within their institutions. This idea is damaging to marginalized communities, especially Native peoples who may not know where their cultural heritage is stored or may have restrictions they would like to impose on their sacred, culturally sensitive information. Building relationships with Native peoples opens the door to collaborative archiving projects, such as the participatory archiving practice mentioned above, and can pave the way for digital or physical repatriation of collections to tribes. Greater involvement in archival processes can also be healing for Native families. McCracken and Hogan-Stacey (2023) note that colonial archives have the power to complete a family tree and add information to a family's narrative through "a single photograph or single line in an attendance register" (p. 50). In this way, fractured families can begin to heal from the trauma caused by generations of colonial genocide. Through recovering cultural and familial knowledge, Native peoples are better able to reconnect with their heritage.

Relationship building in the context of archives requires a great deal of work on the front end for archivists. At a 2024 presentation at SAA's annual conference, Begay, Soto, and Cummins stressed that it is not advisable to approach a Native tribe with a list of demands and

the expectation that the tribe will be happy to meet them all on the archivist's timeline. Begay et al. explained that Native American tribes and nations often wear many hats, and placing undue burden on them is not a good way to begin a relationship. They stressed that Native Americans are not a monolith, and archivists should be willing to research the tribes they want to bring into the conversation *before* approaching them so that the archivist has a general idea of each tribe's relevant practices. Ideally, this research should focus on information about the tribe that was created by the tribe or its members, rather than research conducted by settlers. A common refrain among Native archivists, echoed by Begay et al., is that relationships with non-Native institutions are most successful when the institution approaches a tribe with the question "What do you need from us?" rather than "I think you should do this."

In their case study of the digital repatriation of archival materials from the Anchorage Museum to the Chikaloon Native Village in Alaska, Heather McClain, Amy Valentine, and Selena Ortega-Chiolero (2024) discuss the best practices they implemented or identified during the project. The practice of relationship building should extend beyond the boundaries of both the project and the archives. It is important to meet with Native stakeholders not only on the grounds of the archives, but within their own communities. Making sure visiting elders are comfortable is an important step in building a balanced relationship. Beyond the location of meetings, McClain et al. note that ensuring comfort can include providing honoraria and meals for Native elders and other Native stakeholders, paying attention to how long they are comfortable sitting, pre-sorting materials before a meeting to identify items of interest, discussing items that may be traumatic before showing them to a Native stakeholder, designing websites with Native peoples in mind as the primary users, and holding off on putting digitized materials online until receiving an okay from the tribal community.

Additionally, archivists should not stop putting effort into a relationship because a project or grant ends. Going to gatherings of local marginalized communities can help spread the word about archives to people who may not know what archives are, which can increase both an institution's user base and bring new project ideas to an institution. McClain et al. stress that relationships should be in place before work begins on writing a grant so that the marginalized community can be included in the writing process and their wishes can be built into the project. Relationship building is vital to including broader perspectives across archives.

The relationship of Native Americans to buffalo has a long history, going back in particular to the creation story of the Oglala Lakota people. The primary figure in the Lakota creation story is White Buffalo Calf Woman, a being who brings a sacred gift, the Buffalo Calf Pipe, to a starving Lakota village. The Lakota are instructed to carry out sacred ceremonies using the pipe when they are in need. White Buffalo Calf Woman explains that she represents the buffalo nation, and tells the Lakota that if they ask, the buffalo will fulfill their needs. Through the Buffalo Calf Pipe, the Lakota are bound to the universe. The pipe holds the people together with the rest of the world: "earth, sky, all living things, the two-legged, the four-legged, the

winged ones, the trees, the grasses. Together with the people, they are all related, one family. The pipe holds them all together" (Hämäläinen, 2019, p. 165).

The relationship between the Lakota and the buffalo in this tale is reflected in the spiritual, cultural, economic, and societal history of the Lakota up to the present. All Sioux tribes are members of the InterTribal Buffalo Council and many Sioux reservations care for their own buffalo herds on site (Posthumus, 2016, p. 298). Zontek (2007) describes the immense importance of the birth of a white buffalo calf, a statistically rare phenomenon, born in 1994. Over seventy-five thousand pilgrims traveled to visit the calf within the first two years of its birth, the first coming when the calf was less than twenty-four hours old (p. 143). Many Native American students attending school on reservations are now able to participate in buffalo-centered rituals that were once lost to the prior generations of their families.

The Native American focus on humanity's relationships with animals and the land speaks to the importance of a holistic approach that can translate into an archival environment. Archivists concern themselves already with the preservation of documents and audio-visual and digital materials, as well as with the care of donors. There is potential for this care and concern to extend beyond the immediate archive into communities through oral history projects, participatory archiving, and acknowledging the rights of the subjects of archives more generally. Although I do not discuss it here, this holistic approach can also extend to the way archival buildings and digital practices affect the environment.

Difficulties in Funding, Access, and Outreach

Funding

The difficulties faced by both archives working to decolonize Native materials and reservations working to restore buffalo to their native lands are strikingly similar. Information centers, including archives, rely heavily on grant funding to complete projects that are beyond the scope of the institution's budget, even if they are within scope of the institution's strategic plan. Grants are very competitive as a result. Many of the largest grantor agencies for archives in the United States, including the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, are funded by the American government, which results in fluctuations in the amount of grant money available based on the current balance of political power. This reliance on outside money is one of the reasons archives are so quick to assuage the wants and needs of their donors: not only do they provide new collections, but they also often fund positions and new or updated buildings. Grant-funded positions are typically term limited due to the uncertainty of receiving the same grant in the next funding cycle, resulting in an immense loss of institutional knowledge when people in these positions are forced to leave.

Investigating the buffalo restoration programs of the Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, and Blackfeet reservations in Montana and the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota, Shamon et al. (2022) analyze these efforts with an eye toward combating climate change and providing Native peoples with a sustainable source of food while also meeting their cultural needs. Fort Peck and Fort Belknap management originally fell under the jurisdiction of each reservation's Tribal Fish and Game Departments, with the Fort Belknap program eventually breaking off to become its own entity. The Blackfeet program is a partnership between the Buffalo Program and the Iinnii Initiative, both programs of the Blackfeet, and the Rosebud program is part of the economic division of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Overall, these four programs have very small staffs, relying on part-time seasonal support throughout the year (Shamon et al., 2022, pp. 7-8).

The scale at which archives and buffalo restoration programs operate are vastly different. Buffalo restoration programs are largely supported by the tribe, who have a vested cultural and economic interest in the program's success. Because of the cultural significance of the bison to many Native nations and the inclusion of the larger Native communities in conversations as these programs begin (Fox, 2014, pp. 1-2), community buy-in is built into the programs. By comparison, archival grant programs receive applications for a huge number of proposed projects, and the buy-in ultimately comes from the federal government when they decide how much money to give the granting agencies to distribute for each funding cycle. Funds at the state level are stretched just as thin, and it is often difficult to convince a populace at the city or state level that funding archives is a worthwhile use of money when many people do not even know what an archive is.

Due to the discrepancy in the size of the projects of these two cultural heritage practices, it is unfeasible to suggest a change in the larger structure of funding for archives and other information centers using tribal government as a guide. Rather, I suggest that archives pay attention to how tribes speak to their communities to ensure their actions are in line with the majority opinion while ensuring that all voices are heard. Doing so can help draw more supporters into the archive's circle, whether it be students and faculty on a university campus or visitors and the community surrounding a local museum. Cultivating these relationships means more people are aware of the archives and may be more likely to speak to their local representatives in support of them, which can result in an increase in funds provided to granting agencies. This also gives archivists the opportunity to present themselves to their community as stewards of archival material by inviting the community to provide information about resources that can then be incorporated into metadata, giving the community at large a sense of ownership over its heritage.

Access & Outreach

Shamon et al.'s (2022) explanation that "the benefit bison programs can provide to the community depends on a program's capacity to conduct outreach, deliver programs, and

coordinate with other tribal organizations" (p. 9) is true as well of archives. Access and Use is one of the core values of the Society of American Archivists and is included in its code of ethics (Society of American Archivists, 2020), while outreach, advocacy, and marketing is one of eight primary domains covered by the Academy of Certified Archivists in the test archivists may take to receive their Certified Archivist designation (The Academy of Certified Archivists, n.d.). The primary purpose of archives is use, so it is necessary to conduct outreach to ensure that relevant parties are aware of the archives so that they can fulfill this purpose. Advocacy is necessary to increase access to funding, as previously discussed.

Both archives and buffalo programs find many outreach opportunities through educational programming. The buffalo programs at the Fort Peck, Fort Belknap, and Blackfeet reservations regularly donate buffalo meat for experiential learning to cultural immersion schools and arrange educational activities around the herd, while archives conduct outreach programming in their communities to increase the knowledge of their programs and cultivate new local advocates. Archives may also be involved in school projects to teach schoolchildren about archives at an early age so they can take full advantage of these resources throughout their educational careers. These projects have the added benefit of informing children about what archivists do and how to become one.

The reservations studied by Shamon et al. (2022) have dedicated staff and companion programs who support buffalo restoration programs through organizing opportunities for outreach and access. In the case of the Blackfeet reservation, the Iinnii Initiative is a companion program that focuses specifically on buffalo restoration. There is a great deal of support for Native outreach initiatives for a number of reasons. First, because the buffalo is so culturally important across many Native nations, introducing buffalo into cultural and educational programs is an act of self-determination that helps Native peoples reclaim lost heritage. Second, maintaining local buffalo herds on reservations can help address food insecurity and support Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives. In the archival realm, however, marketing departments are embedded within the parent organization and provide support for the whole institution, meaning archivists have to prove their worth once again to gain some of the limited attention of that department. Archivists may otherwise market the archives and conduct outreach on their own, but this is in addition to an innumerable number of other duties and so it is impossible to give outreach their undivided attention.

Ultimately, having a culture that inherently accepts the value of a program benefits outreach and access efforts by giving the program uninhibited support. Unfortunately, most archives do not exist in that type of culture, but archivists should work to enact a cultural shift in that direction through their advocacy and awareness work, particularly within their institutions. Bringing archivists together across an institution to present a united front when displaying the importance of archives to administration can help increase institutional backing for further inreach and outreach programs.

Conclusion

When viewed through the lens of cultural reclamation, the similarities between decolonization of archives and restoration of buffalo become apparent. By viewing these two decolonial acts side by side, I have made a case that non-Native archivists should consider their ability to help enact cultural change for and with Native Americans by demonstrating that Native peoples are already engaged in this type of decolonizing work and understand it well. Native reservations raising their own buffalo herds are built on the values of stewardship and relationship building that are becoming more common in archival endeavors, and archivists can look to those efforts for frameworks for approaching their own work. By examining the structure of buffalo restoration programs on tribal lands, archivists can glean new ways to approach seeking funding and providing outreach and access.

Through this research, I have demonstrated that archivists should think of themselves as participants in Indigenous cultural heritage restoration. I encourage non-Native archivists in particular to involve themselves in this type of work through reading literature and case studies about archival projects of decolonization and by paying attention to the way Native Americans treat the beings involved in modern day buffalo restoration practices. Decolonizing Native archives goes beyond Native peoples simply providing more information for metadata and finding aids. By involving Native Americans in the stewardship, description, and even collection development policies related to their archival materials, archivists can help Native peoples reclaim further means of self-determination and help them protect the sovereign rights they hold over their data.

Through the authoring of Native-centered protocols for archives such as the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM) and the Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR), Indigenous archivists and allied settler archivists have provided paths by which archival collections which were originally intended to wholly "other" Indigenous culture can be reclaimed by, and in some cases returned to, those cultures. In this way, the decolonized archive can become a partner in repairing the relationship between institutions and Indigenous peoples through continued cultural responsiveness and respect toward non-Western cultures, in direct opposition to the purpose for which colonial archives were originally created.

Both archival decolonization and buffalo restoration have vast implications for Native youth. As mentioned above, because of buffalo herds on reservations, Native schoolchildren can partake in rituals that were inaccessible to the recent generations of their families, strengthening their connections to their ancestors, tribes, and cultures. Similarly, mitigating the potential harm of Native archival material through decolonial practices and making Native archives accessible to Native peoples is necessary so that Native researchers have the ability to tell the world about themselves and their cultures in the way they choose, if they choose. Historically, the ability to decide what was known about Indigenous peoples was removed from them by

colonizers. Working with Native peoples to ensure they are involved in every step of the process of caring for archives that depict them and their people partially restores their self-determination and sovereignty over this material, while also showing respect for and helping them reclaim their cultures, languages, and rituals.

Further research may yet be done on cultural reclamation practices outside of American Indians, encompassing Indigenous and marginalized communities globally, and in other cultural heritage centers beyond archives, especially museums, which have also been sites of extractive colonialism and often display the material culture of Indigenous communities without consent or proper attribution. How do the approaches of these varying communities differ? What can these communities learn from one another? Are there other processes that could be adapted for archival practice? At the risk of sounding overly earnest, I believe that as long as the work is ongoing, the world is moving in the right direction.

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