



Peer-Reviewed Article

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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What I Wish You Knew About OER: Contrasting Librarian and Faculty Perspectives from an OER Couple

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ABSTRACT

When you talk to others on your campus about OER, do you ever feel like you're speaking different languages? So do we, and we're a married couple working at the same campus! A scholarly communication librarian in charge of campus-wide OER advocacy, and a faculty member who's adopted, authored, and researched OER, we each bring our own skills, experiences, and motivations to the table. What might you be overlooking about the other perspective, and how might these blind spots be hindering your efforts to advance OER? This dialogic essay offers practical examples born from our lived experiences, delivered in a conversational and occasionally humorous tone. We explore the challenges and opportunities inherent in this dynamic relationship, focusing on how librarians can hone their approach to better address faculty needs and motivations, while faculty can learn to recognize and more fully utilize the expertise of their library colleagues.

Note: This was first delivered as a presentation at the Open Education Conference, Oct.2025.

KEYWORDS

Open educational resources, OER, advocacy, librarian, and faculty perspectives

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Scene 1: Introduction ^{1 2}

[Faculty at a lectern. Librarian at the back of the room.]

Faculty: Good afternoon, and welcome to “What I Wish You Knew about OER: Contrasting Librarian and Faculty Perspectives from an OER Couple.” I’m a Professor of Music, and I’m presenting today with our campus’ scholarly communication librarian, who also happens to be my wife, who is, um –

[Librarian interrupts, putting away her cell phone as she makes her way to the lectern.]

Librarian: Here, I'm here!

Faculty: Perfect, what happened?

Librarian: ...Well that was interesting, somehow this faculty got my cell number and wants me to know how mad they are. I said no to funding their OER grant. They are using an illegal upload of a copyrighted textbook they found on Google!

Faculty: Oh, well that's actually great timing, because that's the topic of our... *session!*

Librarian: Ah yes, our...very public... *couple's session.*

Scene 2: Framework

Librarian: Okay, where do we start?

Faculty: Let’s check our notes from the last session...

[Both take out their “therapy notebooks.”]

Librarian: Oh right. We’re still working on our active listening. *Okay, you have my attention.*

Faculty: *And you have mine.*

Librarian: And for our “homework,” Dr. Jenn gave us a few topics to talk through. The first one is Communication.

¹ This fictional conversation is inspired by real issues often faced by librarians and faculty involved in OER advocacy. It is not meant to be a true representation of any particular interaction, individual, department, or institution.

² This script was first delivered as a presentation at the Open Education Conference, October 28, 2025, in Denver, CO.

Scene 3: Communication

Librarian: So, did you come up with some things you'd like OER practitioners or librarians, like me, to know about the best ways to communicate with faculty regarding OER initiatives?

Faculty: I thought up a few. They're pretty basic, but important. First, librarians should be aware of the academic calendar when they're emailing faculty about OER initiatives. Don't send important updates or set deadlines during the first week of the semester or the week prior, or during finals week. I promise I will not read them.

Librarian: That seems a little... picky?

Faculty: I'm *sharing* right now...

Librarian: ...Okay, *you have my attention*.

Faculty: Thank you. Another thing is, faculty need a lot of lead time for any initiative that requires significant upfront work on their end, like calls for adoption or creation grants. 4 to 6 weeks minimum, but a few months is even better.

And related, you'll reach more people if you market your programs in multiple ways. Don't just send an email or two and assume your message reaches everyone. Ask your provost and deans to help spread the word, hold workshops through your center for teaching, and arrange visits to individual departments to talk about these opportunities.

Librarian: Yes, okay...I already do most of those things. But thank you for sharing.

Faculty: All right, your turn. What would you like faculty to know about communicating with librarians concerning OER?

Librarian: I guess most importantly that you are not alone. Sometimes faculty are... set in their ways, and any suggestions of change are met with pushback or just ignoring us. We will help you find materials. We are trained professionals with advanced degrees and years of experience finding and evaluating relevant resources.

We also have an entire team of instructional designers who will help integrate OER into your course LMS. They are also trained and have experience in helping faculty be more successful in teaching with the tools they provide. So, respect these people's expertise and make use of it!

Faculty: Yes! Wow, we are so good at communication. What's next on the list?

Librarian: Hey, wait, I'm not done! I wanted to talk about the panel.

Faculty: What panel?

Librarian: *The* panel we did on [look at notes] March 3rd, 2020, at... 2pm. Remember, that time you completely contradicted the point of our talk by saying no one should adopt OER before they get tenure???

Faculty: Um, I remember Dr. Jenn asking us to use “*I feel*” statements instead of “you” statements...

Librarian: Okay... Remember when we were giving our first ever on-campus panel presentation about OER, and several faculty and I spoke about the value of OER, and you said during your portion that no faculty should think about adopting OER while they are still working toward tenure? That made me *feel*... undermined because it was such a shift in our message. In the future, I would *appreciate* it if you’d check in with me before a curveball like that, especially at a campus-wide event meant to encourage faculty to get on board with OER!

Faculty: I hear what you’re saying. I understand how that would make you feel undermined. In the future, I will get my thoughts written down earlier so we can go over them, get on the same page, and ensure we are pulling in the same direction.

I’d like to point out that, when I made my shift to OER, I spent two years authoring workbook materials for my four classes, during which I had to largely put my research on hold. That choice could have seriously hindered my chances of getting tenure. And that made me *feel*... anxious about the future. So, I was speaking from my experience, hoping to help others approach their work with clear eyes.

Librarian: Thank you for being honest about your constraints. I acknowledge that faculty, especially those in their tenure-earning years, have to be protective of their time.

Faculty: In retrospect, I should have spoken more carefully and said that people shouldn’t jump right to *creating* OER before exploring if they can instead adopt or adapt some. And that, if they do choose to create OER, they should do it sustainably, setting reasonable goals, seeking support from colleagues on their campus or peers at other schools, seeking internal and external grant funding, and by learning how their campus T&P policies recognize and reward this work.

Librarian: That way of putting it would have fit a lot better with the rest of the panel... And maybe we could work together to revisit our campus’ tenure and promotion policies to ensure they include acknowledging the creation of OER in particular, as legitimate contributions to both teaching and research.

Faculty: I would love to. Glad we cleared that up!

[Both give a thumbs up and a wink to the audience.]

Scene 4: Meet in the Middle

Faculty: [Flips through notes] Next, Dr. Jenn said: “What does meet in the middle mean to you?” Were you able to come up with your two examples?

Librarian: Yes. I'll start with *compromise*. I know now that I need to be more flexible in not only how I approach faculty about OER adoption, but in finding materials. When faculty do reach out for help, I shouldn't force any particular OER on them just because it is OER.

Faculty: Sure, that makes sense. Do you have an example?

Librarian: Sure. I have this faculty who's been looking for OER on the topic of “Nursing & Global Health in Guatemala” for her upcoming study abroad course. I looked as far as my Googling can take me, and I found some OER that might work for global health, but none specifically about Guatemala. Rather than asking her to write her own OER, we came to a compromise and found free library-provided e-textbooks and supplemented with journal articles. So, she'll use those subscription-based items in addition to the OER, and I'm okay with that.

Faculty: Great job. I love that you were able to find a compromise and help that faculty!

Librarian: Faculty, how do you “meet in the middle?”

Faculty: I thought about making sure we are checking our blind spots. When I first started authoring OER, I didn't fully understand Creative Commons licensing, even though I had been using them for a few years. I also remember hearing you correct some other faculty when they referred to their own adopted resources as “open-source textbooks.” I didn't realize there was a difference until then! So, I had some blind spots on the terminology and expertise.

Librarian: Yeah, I remember that. I appreciate you telling me about those blind spots of yours.

Faculty: And you've shared in the past that you have some blind spots related to course creation and textbook adoptions.

Librarian: Definitely. I think learning more about how and when course sections get created, and assigned to faculty, and when and how course materials get assigned in various departments – can help me meet the departments where they are and improve our OER initiatives.

Faculty: What else have you got?

Librarian: I think librarians can use *creative thinking* to help meet in the middle. This is about how we advocate and reach out about OER, but also, like you said, to whom and when. I

know you all aren't always reading my emails! So, I've talked to faculty at new faculty orientation, gotten students involved in advocacy, and reached out to chairs and deans to see which of them have some pull about what textbooks get used.

Following OER practices, I try to *remix* and *adapt* my advocacy strategy. I've even been known to contact some of our faculty via LinkedIn! If they post about a new class they're teaching or a new program, I'll comment that they should reach out to me for an OER that might work.

Faculty: I love that!

Librarian: I know, thank you.

Faculty: My last “meet in the middle” technique is to lean into *empathy*. It's important for librarians to accept that OER is not going to work for every class. For general education courses where a faculty is teaching 500 students across multiple sections, that proprietary test bank may be the difference between managing that workload and everything falling apart – at least in the short term. And a lot of times faculty don't know which courses they'll be assigned months in advance. Sometimes, it's the week before classes start!

Librarian: Of course. At the same time, faculty need to recognize that librarians have their own limitations, like uncertainty of funding, changing campus policies and priorities, and trying to serve the entire campus on limited time.

Faculty: I can see why that would be challenging!

Librarian: And I didn't realize that the course rotation calendar would have such a big impact until we started offering our textbook affordability grants. We ask faculty who are awarded funds to teach using their free or OER course materials for at least 3 semesters – which was mandated by our administration, which funds the grant, not by me – and a bunch of faculty told me they wanted to apply but have no idea what they will be teaching semester to semester. So, I decided to notify the chairs that faculty are doing this work, and are getting a grant for it, so that chairs will be aware of it when assigning courses.

Faculty: I think that's a great example of leading with empathy and letting your understanding of the other party's issues inform your work.

Librarian: Thanks, my love.

Faculty: Anytime!

[Both give another thumbs up and a wink to the audience.]

Scene 5: Don't Go to Bed Angry

Faculty: Alright, I *feel*... like we're making some good progress here.

Librarian: I see what you did there. Nice.

Faculty: Well, what else does Dr. Jenn want us to dig into?

Librarian: [Flips through notes] "Don't go to bed angry."

Faculty: Ummm, okay... What does that have to do with building healthy relationships between librarians and faculty around OER?

Librarian: Well... for example... I *feel* like when I send an email to all faculty about OER grants, adoption opportunities, or even just to brag about our successes, I'm sometimes met with disdain. Faculty act like I'm telling them *how* to teach and expecting them to stop what they're doing and write a book! I feel it would be good for them to acknowledge my perspective...

Faculty: Wow. I *feel* like you're painting with a pretty broad brush there—

Librarian: Well, I *feel* that faculty don't appreciate it when I email them about a specific OER that is available that may fit perfectly with their course - sometimes that "random email" is not *really* coming from me. Administration has tasked me with increasing OER adoption, specifically by targeting high enrollment gen ed courses. Then I get emails back about how dare I tell faculty what to teach with! Fast forward a semester, and the administration asks me to email those same faculty yet again. It is hard not to get frustrated! Faculty don't realize I am trying to navigate various power dynamics as well.

Faculty: That sounds super frustrating. How can faculty....?

Librarian: [interrupting] Oh! And let's not forget the times when faculty *do* want help finding OER, and they send me an email that just says: "Help, I need OER for Nutrition." This needs to be a collaboration. I am not a subject expert in every academic program. They need to send me their syllabus, course outcomes, what textbooks or other resources they usually use, and *then* I can start looking for them!

And after I send some options, *please* reply and tell me if they work or not! Faculty shouldn't ask me to do hours of work and then ghost me because the text is missing one chapter, they think is important, or because they couldn't be bothered to even review it! I am a librarian, *not a vending machine!!*

Faculty: Wow. That was... a lot.

Librarian: Yeah. I know.

Faculty: Are you ready to hear my reaction to your reaction?

Librarian: ...Okay.

Faculty: [cautiously] Okay. I hear what you are saying, and I validate those frustrations.

Librarian: Yeah. And...?

Faculty: And... I can't imagine what it must *feel* like having to put up with all that pushback and pressure from all different directions. But I can empathize with you. Faculty are no strangers to policies constraining our work.

Librarian: Yeah. And...??

Faculty: And... I will also add that there could be good reasons why faculty might be short on details. First, they're new to OER, so they probably haven't even thought it through. Second, it might be a new class for them, and they don't have an existing text to reference. Or maybe they are in panic mode from their workload but wanted to shoot off a short message to start the conversation before that email exits the top of their inbox!

Librarian: I get that. And...?

Faculty: And... Yeah, those faculty need to do better.

Librarian: In the meantime, I guess we can keep motivated by focusing on the positives, like the fact that faculty are reaching out about OER in the first place.

Faculty: There you go. Do you feel... better?

Librarian: I do feel like I'll sleep less angry tonight...

Faculty: ...Great?

[Both give a weaker, half-hearted thumbs up and wink to the audience.]

Scene 6: Commitment

Faculty: [looks at his watch] We need to start wrapping up our session. Our last assignment from Dr. Jenn is to focus on *shared commitment*.

Librarian: One great example is the shared work we have been doing on our new course marking initiative. When you chose that as your capstone project for your OER Fellows program, it made me *feel*... like I have a committed partner and co-advocate on campus who shares my goals. Honestly, I know some faculty don't want to hear from *me* – again – about OER.

Faculty: And I *feel...* glad that you appreciate the project. But I also sometimes *feel...* guilty that “my project” created a bunch more work for you.

Librarian: Well, it *did*! But because we have worked so closely on OER over the years – we both knew the value and importance of getting courses marked: to allow students to make enrollment choices based on affordability and help me with tracking adoptions and assessment.

Faculty: And I really enjoy feeling like I can have an impact beyond the several dozen students per year that I teach. Working with you on the course marking project gave us the chance to impact many more students and to advocate for OER to new audiences across campus in new ways.

Librarian: Definitely. And I needed you there for our meetings with enrollment management, department chairs, and graduate school advisors, because I don't know about how classes are set up, the timeframe, and other technical aspects. I wouldn't know all the questions to ask.

Faculty: I'm glad I was able to help anticipate some of their concerns. I am nearly fluent in *department chair-ese*, after all!

Librarian: Speaking of commitment – do you want to share that conversation you had with our political science faculty recently?

Faculty: Oh yeah. We were out for drinks, and he posed the question: “What would you say to faculty who say that course materials are such a small portion of a student's overall costs, so why focus your efforts on that, when tuition, fees, and cost of living are bigger parts of the pie?” And I told him that course materials costs have outpaced tuition increased over the past few decades. And that course materials are almost the only student cost that individual faculty can directly impact. And lastly, it is not either/or. Adopting OER doesn't prevent you from also advocating for lower tuition or increased grant support.

Librarian: Those are great points. I feel like hearing it from a colleague rather than a librarian had a much stronger impact. Having faculty and administration also committed to OER work helps me feel supported and that my efforts are important. Speaking toward commitment, I also feel that finding a way to get OER initiatives into your strategic plan, whether it's at an institution level or a part of your library's plan, is also important.

Faculty: For sure. That is a great way for faculty, librarians, and administrators to come together and show commitment for OER.

[Both give yet another thumbs up and a wink to the audience.]

Scene 7: Summary and Lessons Learned

Librarian: So, where does that leave us?

Faculty: We've covered a lot of ground on things we can do to continue building and maintaining healthy librarian-faculty relationships, in support of advancing OER initiatives across campus.

Librarian: We sure have. I think one conclusion we can draw is that we both really care about students.

Faculty: And we are both really busy most of the time.

Librarian: If we can find ways to support each other and to learn from our past missteps, we will all be better off.

Faculty: We should consider each other's workflows, and if we don't know them, we can work to *get* to know them.

Librarian: And we should recognize the value and unique strengths that each of us brings to the table.

Faculty: And, whether you are a faculty member or a librarian, you definitely don't need to *marry* someone from the other side of the aisle to advance your OER agenda... But it's always an option, just saying!

Librarian: Maybe they can start with a task force, or a joint workshop or conference presentation?

Faculty: I guess so.

Librarian: The point is –

Librarian and Faculty: [facing each other, said like a catch phrase] We're both on the same team, and we both want the same thing!

[They shake hands, then turn to wave to the audience.]

Librarian and Faculty: [to the audience] Thanks!!

[END]



Book Review

Review of *Information Literacy and Critical Thinking: Using Perspective Transformation to Break Information Bubbles*

Jessica Swaringen, *Georgia Southern University*

ABSTRACT

Review of *Information Literacy and Critical Thinking: Using Perspective Transformation to Break Information Bubbles* by Amanda Nichols Hess. ALA Editions, 2025. ISBN: 979-8892553247

KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy, transformative learning theory, information literacy

SUGGESTED CITATION

Swaringen, J. (2026). Review of the book *Information literacy and critical thinking: Using perspective transformation to break information bubbles*, by A.N. Hess. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 11(1), 32–35. <https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/20/3>

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Introduction

Teaching librarians exist in a strange and ever-evolving state, straddling responsibilities and roles in credit-bearing instruction, one-shot classroom visits, research assistance (for both students and faculty), outreach, and advocacy, to name a few. In spite of the professional expertise developed from such extensive instructional activities, librarians are often pigeonholed to database walkthroughs and source evaluation checklists. How do librarians move beyond technical skills instruction and foster deep critical engagement? Amanda Nichols Hess presents a possible solution: operationalizing critical pedagogy with perspective transformation, as outlined in *Information Literacy and Critical Thinking: Using Perspective Transformation to Break Information Bubbles*.

Hess argues that perspective transformation is a valuable tool for library professionals engaging in critical librarianship broadly, and critical pedagogy more specifically. Furthermore, she asserts that understanding how perspective transformation works can better enable teaching librarians to foster critical information literacy in their students' learning environments. In understanding how critical theory and its applications are tied to transformative learning theory, teaching librarians can meaningfully consider and reconcile the disconnect between their theory and practice in critical pedagogy.

About the Author

Part of what lends the book its credibility and approachability is Hess herself, whose scholarly and professional record makes her well suited to tackle this topic. Between her credentials – a PhD in Educational Leadership, an education specialist certificate in instructional technology, and an MS in Information Science – and her current role as coordinator of instruction and research help at Oakland University, Hess situates herself at the nexus of pedagogy, librarianship, and transformative learning theory. Her publication history, which ranges from books on modular online learning to edited volumes on instructional identities, reflects a sustained commitment to understanding how librarians teach, learn, and evolve within academic environments.

This new book builds on her research trajectory. Her scholarship on transformative learning, teacher identity, and online instruction is well cited, and the echoes of her nationally recognized 2018 dissertation are clearly audible throughout *Information Literacy and Critical Thinking*. Hess writes not only as a researcher but as a practitioner who has lived through the phases of perspective transformation herself, offering examples from her own professional life that feel grounded rather than performative.

Summary of Contents

Chapter 1, "Framing Critical Librarianship and Perspective Transformation," does a fine job of explaining critical theory, as well as a few related applications: critical pedagogy, critical librarianship, and critical information literacy. This chapter also introduces readers to Jack

Mezirow's learning theory of perspective transformation. Hess outlines ten phases, as established by Mezirow, for individuals experiencing perspective transformation. The rest of the book is organized using these ten phases, though Hess notes that the phases are "neither linear nor straightforward" despite being "sequenced."

Chapter 2 is about "disorienting dilemmas," which serve as the catalyst for perspective transformation. In these situations, an individual's presumptions and beliefs are challenged and disrupted in some way, but they are also faced with the necessity of taking action: in Hess's words, "Are we going to choose to acknowledge and grapple with this disorientation?"

In Chapters 3-8, Hess discusses the subsequent phases in perspective transformation: self-examination and alienation in Chapter 3, connecting with other's discontent in Chapter 4, exploring alternative attitudes and behaviors in Chapter 5, acquiring skills and trying new roles in Chapter 6, developing competence, confidence, and relationships based on new ways of thinking in Chapter 7, and fully integrating changed perspective into actions in Chapter 8.

In each chapter proceeding the first, Hess presents a concise summary of existing scholarship, connecting this existing literature to applications in critical librarianship and critical pedagogy. Hess also provides a few examples of her experiences with perspective transformation in her professional life, at immediate and gradual points, as well as at individual and systemic levels. Including these varied reflective anecdotes allow teaching librarians at all experience levels to find something relatable to connect to as they are reading. After these examples are discussed, Hess discusses how teaching librarians might facilitate critical library instruction by creating learning environments conducive to transformative learning. Finally, each of these chapters conclude with "Opportunities for Reflection and Action," prompting the reader to connect the concepts discussed in the chapter to their own individual experiences.

This combination of theoretical overview, practical application, and reflective exercise creates a rhythm that is both instructive and engaging. Particularly effective are Hess's examples from her own career, which helped ground Mezirow's theory in the everyday realities of library instruction. They also model the vulnerability and self-interrogation she asks her readers to undertake—an important reminder that critical pedagogy demands personal reckoning, not just professional rhetoric.

Strengths

One of the book's most compelling strengths is its clear investment in combining scholarly rigor with lived experience. Hess's examples of her own perspective transformations—whether at the individual or systemic level—make abstract concepts tangible. Readers who have felt the dissonance between their critical pedagogical ideals and the constraints of their institutional environments will find her stories validating and illuminating. They also demonstrate her central claim: that transformation is relational, iterative, and sustained through dialogue and connection.

Another strength lies in Hess's stylistic balance. While she grounds her ideas in complex critical theory, she keeps her writing mostly conversational, easing the reader through dense theoretical terrain. This interplay of formality and plain speaking makes the book approachable for early-career librarians or those new to critical theory who may feel intimidated by its complexities.

Hess's inclusion of conceptual visualizations—though hit-or-miss depending on one's preferred learning style—also reveals her pedagogical generosity. Even if the diagrams do not always deepen understanding, their presence signals her desire to reach readers in multiple modalities, reflecting her broader commitment to inclusive teaching.

Finally, the reflective prompts at the end of each chapter are particularly valuable. Rather than prescribing a rigid method, Hess invites readers to examine their own assumptions and teaching identities, emphasizing that perspective transformation is not a solitary intellectual endeavor, but a process nurtured through community, conversation, and shared vulnerability.

Limitations

Despite its many strengths, the book is not without limitations. The most notable challenge lies in the book's structural commitment to following Mezirow's ten phases of perspective transformation. While the guidance offered in the 'taking transformation forward' sections is valuable, the structural commitment to following Mezirow's phases forces the instructional design content to be encountered piecemeal, which lessens the book's effectiveness as a standalone pedagogical resource. Readers interested in how to facilitate transformative learning for students may have preferred a dedicated chapter or section explicitly focused on instructional design for critical information literacy. However, this criticism is simply one of structural choices in the book, not of its overall content.

Conclusion

This book is recommended for librarians interested in critical theory, especially those experiencing perspective transformation in their own careers. Hess provides a comprehensive roadmap for perspective transformation in librarianship, supplying relatable examples of such transformations in her own life. This book would best suit beginner-to-intermediate professionals, or at least those who are relatively new to critical pedagogy and critical librarianship. For those more familiar with the aforementioned concepts, the book may still be valuable in its detailed exploration of the phases involved in perspective transformation, especially toward the end of each chapter where opportunities for transformative learning are discussed.



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Book Review

Review of *Innovative Library Workplaces: Transformative Human Resource Strategies*

Kristina Clement, *Kennesaw State University*

ABSTRACT

Review of *Innovative library workplaces: Transformative human resources strategies*, edited by Lisa Kallman Hopkins and Bridgit McCafferty. Association of College and Research Libraries, 2025. 392 pp. ISBN 9798892555357.

KEYWORDS

human resources, work culture, libraries

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Clement, K. (2026). Review of *Innovative library workplaces: Transformative human resources strategies*, L.K. Hopkins and B. McCafferty, (Eds). Association of College and Research Libraries. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 11(1), 36–38.

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Innovative library workplaces: Transformative human resource strategies, edited by Lisa Kallman Hopkins and Bridgit McCafferty, is a timely contribution to the ongoing debates about labor and organizational culture in academic libraries. The editors ground the book in the transformations that libraries experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that library workplaces must permanently reimagine how they recruit, compensate, and support employees (p. vii). In the introduction, the editors highlight a central tension that runs throughout the book: how to balance autonomy and collaboration in ways that sustain both individuals and institutions. With 22 chapters, the book is divided into two parts: Part I addresses human resources in libraries, and Part II examines workplace culture and organization.

Part I, “Human Resources in Libraries” contains 11 chapters across three sections on recruiting and hiring, onboarding, and training, and salary studies and unions. The opening chapters make a strong case for treating human resources as a strategic, rather than transactional, function. Chapter 1, “HR as Strategic Partner: Practical Approaches for Building HR Capacity in an Academic Library Setting,” outlines a roadmap that includes tools such as gap analyses, SWOT frameworks, and futures thinking. The author’s argument that libraries must align HR with organizational strategy is persuasive, particularly in its emphasis on workforce planning and equity-centered mission statements. Chapter 2, “Subvert the Dominant Paradigm: Reimagining Academic Library Hiring Practices,” takes on the structural whiteness of academic library hiring and critiques the persistence of “fit” as a hiring criterion. Through case studies, the authors show how libraries can embed equity directly into the hiring process by using search advocates, rubrics, and intentional committee composition rather than relying solely on individual bias training. Chapter 2 stands out because it moves beyond incremental fixes to interrogate the underlying systems that replicate homogeneity in the profession. Compensation also emerges as a key theme in Part I. Chapter 9, “Assessing Salary Equitability: A Review and Case Study of UVA Library’s Salary Review and Adjustment Initiative” is one of the book’s more data-driven chapters. By documenting inequities and implementing corrective adjustments, the authors provide a replicable model for other institutions. This empirical grounding is a welcome contrast to more aspirational chapters, demonstrating the value of transparent data analysis in building equitable workplaces.

Part II, “Work Culture and Organization” contains 11 chapters across three sections on employee morale, flexible work arrangements, and strategic planning and reorganizing. Chapter 12, “Wellness Initiatives in Academic Libraries” illustrates how libraries have attempted to move beyond patron-centered wellness toward supporting employees. While the examples are practical, the chapter reflects a broader challenge in current conversations around wellness, labor, and burnout: the reliance on anecdotal accounts rather than longitudinal evidence. Efforts to reduce burnout, improve morale, and redesign workspaces are timely but not always evaluated for long-term impact. The most compelling contributions in this section come from

the chapters on flexible work. Chapter 15, “The New Normal: An Empirical Examination of Remote Work in Academic Libraries,” presents an empirical study of remote work in academic libraries showing that flexible arrangements are not only popular but also crucial for recruitment, retention, and equity. Complementing this, Chapter 16, “Flexible Work Empowers: An Inclusive Strategy for Recruitment and Retention of Academic Librarians,” argues that flexible work is an inclusive strategy, particularly for employees who have historically been excluded by rigid workplace norms. Together, Chapters 15 and 16 advance one of the book’s most important arguments: that remote and hybrid work should be seen not as temporary accommodations but as long-term equity tools.

Across both sections, autonomy and collaboration serve as the dual foundations of the post-pandemic workplace, just as the editors described in the introduction. Employees want flexibility in how and where they work but also value a sense of collective belonging. Inclusivity in hiring and retention is a consistent thread, with some chapters (notably Chapter 2) moving beyond surface-level reforms to engage in structural critique. Wellness and flexibility are framed not as individual coping mechanisms but as organizational strategies. The book’s strength lies in its practical orientation. Readers will find tools that can be directly applied in library settings, including onboarding road maps, salary study models, and HR mission-building exercises. Many chapters blend pragmatic strategies with a willingness to interrogate structural inequities.

The book’s limitations stem mainly from scope and perspective. Most contributors are administrators or managers, leaving staff, paraprofessional, and contingent perspectives underrepresented. The focus is also largely North American, with limited international context. While the case study approach of many of the chapters keeps the book engaging, it sometimes leans towards description rather than critical assessment, raising questions about long-term outcomes. Despite these limitations, the book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on library labor by decisively centering employee experience. By highlighting hiring reform, salary equity, wellness, and flexible work, the book situates libraries within the broader conversation about workplace equity in higher education. Its primary audience is practitioners seeking actionable strategies, though researchers also find much to consider. For practitioners, the book offers concrete models; for researchers, it raises pressing questions about how power, equity, and labor relations will shape the library workplace in the years to come. *Innovative library workplaces: Transformative human resource strategies* is a timely and adaptable collection that succeeds in inviting libraries to reimagine their workplaces as inclusive, flexible, and sustainable.



Book Review

Review of Interrogation to Integration: Centering Social Justice in Special Collections, Archives and Preservation

Bethany Peterkin, MLIS, *Capilano University*

ABSTRACT

Review of *Interrogation to integration: Centering social justice in special collections, archives, and preservation*, edited by Kim Hoffman and Rachel Makarowski. Association of College and Research Libraries, 2025. 396 pp. ISBN 979-8-89255-559-3.

KEYWORDS

Social justice, archives, DEI, library instruction

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A common narrative within academic libraries and archival spaces is that they operate as neutral spaces: a perspective that has long been celebrated. The reality, however, is a bit more complicated. The edited volume *Interrogation to Integration: Centering Social Justice in Special Collections, Archives and Preservation* challenges this assumption by revealing how these spaces, dedicated to knowledge preservation, have historically memorialized the narratives of individuals in positions of power, thereby reinforcing systematic inequities. Across twenty-three chapters, contributors from across the United States critically examine this legacy of harmful narrative and offer strategies for emphasizing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in special collections, archives, and preservation practices. The book uses case studies, research findings, and practical methods to guide librarians, archivists, and other information professionals. It is especially useful for those committed to social justice work, even when resources are limited.

Introduction

The editors open *Interrogation to Integration* by situating this collection within the broader context of inequities that are deeply ingrained in archival and library practices. They emphasize that while the professions have historically served as a tool for preserving the status quo, individual practitioners can take on more practical, sustainable steps to center underrepresented voices. Hoffman and Makarowski encourage small, scalable interventions that may be incorporated into daily workflows rather than projects that require substantial grant funding. Their approach reinforces the idea that social justice work is not optional, but rather a foundational aspect of professional practice. The editors also stress the importance of integrating social justice into daily routines to strengthen DEI work in higher education and in doing so, these initiatives may become more resilient to political pressures and institutional resistance.

About the Editors

Editors Kim Hoffman and Rachel Makarowski are both experienced library professionals and have dutifully curated this book with complementary expertise. Hoffman is the Digital Curation & Preservation Librarian at Hamilton College and has made a commitment to embed DEI principles into preservation and digital stewardship. Makarowski, the Special Collections Librarian at Miami University, incorporates extensive experience in instruction, outreach, and social justice into special collections. Together the editors bring together a diverse group of archivists, librarians, and academics, whose credentials span MLIS, PhD, and MA degrees in library science, history, and museum studies. Each author reflects how their identities and professional experiences have shaped their approaches to archival and library practice and their contribution to this book.

Summary of Contents

Interrogation to Integration is organized into five thematic sections: research, description, preservation and access, outreach, and instruction. Each part offers both reflective discussions and actionable strategies for readers to engage and be inspired by.

Part 1: Research

In the first section, the book explores methods for identifying and addressing archival silences. Chapter 1 features an interview study at the University of Illinois that focuses on systemic gaps in archival subspecialties and provides suggestions on how to amplify underrepresented voices. Next, Chapter 2 examines the power dynamics encoded in maps and demonstrates how both real and fictional cartography can challenge dominant narratives. Chapter 3 showcases how a grant-supported project at the Abraham Pollen Archives uncovered contributions from women and BIPOC medical practitioners and offers guidance for similarly under-resourced contexts, as demonstrated at the Pollen Archives. Chapter 4 documents reparative work at the University of Maryland through the Universities Studying Slavery initiative, which highlights an archivist's role in leading institutional reflection. The last chapter of Part 1 presents a digital project connecting records across regions to reveal Black family histories in the Delmarva Peninsula and emphasizes collaboration as a catalyst for innovation. Collectively, Chapters 1-5 illustrate both the depth of inequity in archival collections while also offering pragmatic approaches to addressing it.

Part 2: Description

The second section of the book emphasizes reparative and culturally competent cataloguing practices, as is noted in Chapter 6, which provides a step-by-step approach to integrate inclusive descriptive practices at the Rockefeller Archive Center and includes strategies for securing institutional buy-in. Two case studies are examined in Chapter 7, each focusing on dehumanizing archival descriptions that were corrected in an effort to underscore the responsibility of information professionals in restorative work. Chapter 8 provides guidance on how to implement reparative description practices across catalogue records, with emphasis on balancing specific procedural instructions with broader recommendations applicable to other institutions.

Part 3: Preservation and Access

The third section of *Interrogation to Integration* highlights inclusive stewardship practices. The first chapter of the section, Chapter 9, recounts rapid-response preservation initiatives following the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting and the professional and emotional challenges that came with preserving the materials during such a community crisis. Chapter 10 details a digital transcription and captioning project for poetry recordings, showing how

inclusive digital practices may enhance accessibility. Barriers to equity are discussed in Chapter 11, specifically in computer music archives, where a crowd-sourced linked data catalogue demonstrates how technology can highlight marginalized voices. This case study demonstrates how technology can be harnessed to disrupt traditional hierarchies.

Part 4: Outreach

The fourth section explores strategies for engaging underrepresented populations. Chapter 12 emphasizes sustainability and scalability and describes DEI-focused lesson plans that were developed with limited resources. Chapter 13 demonstrates how cross-campus partnerships can improve stewardship and uncover hidden voices. Chapter 14 highlights initiatives at Princeton University that engage students while confronting entrenched Eurocentric narratives. Decentering acquisition practices is the focus of Chapter 15, with an emphasis on community relationships over traditional donor hierarchies. Chapter 16 presents a model for encouraging first-generation and underrepresented students in archival research. Chapters 12-16 collectively provide examples of how outreach can advance equity while fostering community engagement.

Part 5: Instruction

The final part of the book focuses on pedagogy and critical engagement. Chapter 17 examines class sessions in which students examine legacies of race and colonialism in collections. The Personal Archive Assignment is introduced in Chapter 18, which prompts students to reflect on personal identity and archival silences. Chapter 19 describes a critical pedagogy discussion group, and Chapter 20 outlines courses that encourage students to challenge assumptions about collection neutrality. Chapter 21 discusses the systematic integration of DEI principles in instruction sessions, and Chapter 22 details a semester-long course on archival bias that employed iterative design and inclusive principles. Chapter 23 illustrates how local Jewish history collections can be used to teach social justice theory. As a unit, Chapters 17-23 provides a comprehensive toolkit for embedding social justice in library instruction.

Taken together, these sections offer a robust and multifaceted framework for integrating DEI principles across library and archival work.

Strengths

One of *Interrogation to Integration*'s greatest strengths lies in how it blends theoretical perspectives with practical strategies and reflective case studies. Any reader may gain a nuanced understanding of structural inequities along with actionable guidance for implementing changes in their own workspaces, classrooms, or institutions. The breadth of institutional contexts, project implementations, and methodological approaches ensures that information professionals at all career stages can find relevant insights. Low-cost, scalable interventions

make this volume accessible and highly useful. Author positionality statements and reflective insights help to enhance the book's ethical focus, demonstrating accountability and transparency in practice.

Limitations

A potential drawback is that the book focuses on U.S.-based institutions. While strategies and case studies are broadly applicable, the inclusion of international perspectives or Indigenous archival practices could have strengthened the discussion further. Additionally, while some chapters provide step-by-step guidance, others are more descriptive and require readers to extrapolate strategies independently.

Conclusion

Interrogation to Integration: Centering Social Justice in Special Collections, Archives and Preservation is an essential addition to any library's collection for its practical contributions to inclusive librarianship and archival work. By weaving together research, case studies, and practical strategies, the book underscores that social justice is a central responsibility, not simply an optional endeavor. Librarians, archivists, and instructors seeking to integrate DEI principles into research, description, preservation, outreach, or instruction will find this book instructive, insightful, and inspiring. Despite minor limitations, *Interrogation to Integration* successfully illuminates actionable approaches to dismantling systemic inequities and centering marginalized voices, making it an indispensable resource for professionals committed to creating more just and equitable library and archival spaces.



Book Review

Review of *The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries*

Meghan Lenahan, *Binghamton University*

ABSTRACT

Review of Spina, C. & Oling, R. A. (2025). *The digital accessibility handbook for libraries*. Chicago: ALA Editions in collaboration with Core.

KEYWORDS

Libraries, accessibility, universal design

SUGGESTED CITATION

Lenahan, M. (2026). Review of the book *Digital accessibility handbook for libraries*, by C. Spina and R.A. Oling. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 11(1), 44–49.

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Starting in April 2026, libraries and other public entities across the United States will be required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II requirements to make all publicly available online and digital content accessible. Many library staff are struggling to know how to get started with bringing their websites, online resources, and other electronic tools up to code. *The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries*, written by Carli Spina and Rebecca Albrecht Oling, presents a guide for libraries on how to approach accessibility and what considerations to make to be compliant with the legislation. The book was written as a guide for starting and improving libraries' accessibility work, particularly in academic and larger public libraries.

While most libraries are currently working on accessibility to meet the standards set by legal mandates, the book brings up important points of why it's important to think about accessibility from the very beginning, and what to consider when making decisions about purchasing resources, arranging physical spaces, and designing online materials for your library. Accessibility not only focuses on disability, but also on the ability of library users, whether it's reading comprehension or the device used to access library content.

Carli Spina is an associate professor and head of research and instructional services at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and has scholarly experience with universal design and accessibility (p. 263). Rebecca Albrecht Oling is the director of digital accessibility at Purchase College, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system (p. 263). Together, the authors work within SUNY to compile best practices for accessibility in the libraries, as well as co-leading the team to implement the Electronic Implementation Accessibility Policy (p. 263).

The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries contains a preface and fourteen chapters. Each chapter opens with a few real-life library scenarios that apply to the theme of the chapter and gives the reader a sense of how accessibility plays a role in daily library operations. Every chapter also ends with interviews and some tips with experts in the field (including librarians, attorneys, and UX designers), who are credited as contributors at the end of the book. For example, Jingjing Wu is a Web Librarian at Texas Tech University Libraries, offers tips on using artificial intelligence (AI) as a supplemental tool for improving accessibility (p. 193-196).

Chapter 1 provides an overview of definitions of disability, the social and legal history of disability, various types of disability and their varying accessibility needs. It gives the reader context on why accessibility work matters and how societal views may affect this work. Throughout the book, accessibility is framed not merely as legal compliance but as a core service principle aimed at maximizing equitable access. They also let the reader know that since there are differing opinions on whether to use "identity-first" such as "deaf person" or "person-first" such as "individual who is deaf," the terms are used interchangeably, usually based on the preference of the specific person if it is known (p. 11).

Chapter 2 explores hardware, software, and physical spaces within the libraries. The authors discuss assistive technology that widens access to library collections (p. 23) as well as software with built-in features such as screen readers. They recommend working with IT (information technology) to ensure that the assistive technology is usable, continually updated, and compatible with other technologies (p. 24). The collaboration between libraries and IT also extends to physical spaces, such as computer labs and other workstations.

Chapters 3 through 5 form the core of the book's digital accessibility guidance, covering web standards, user-centered website design, and accessible file formats. Particularly useful is the authors' attention to often-overlooked formats such as spreadsheets, mathematical equations, and sheet music discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 3 covers the principles of web accessibility. The chapter clearly introduces key standards such as WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), offering an accessible entry point for librarians with limited technical background. Some considerations for web accessibility outlined by the authors include color contrast, font type and size, and the wording of content (reducing the use of jargon or defining it if it must be used). Chapter 4 continues the web accessibility discussion looking at the library website. The authors recommend that readers get feedback from library users to understand the library community needs and identify where there might be gaps in access. The chapter goes into more detail about actionable ways a library can make its website more accessible, in addition to the tips provided in Chapter 3. In Chapter 5, the authors focus on the accessibility of files and digital media, which includes audio, video, text, and images. The chapter also discusses specific file types that may often get overlooked in accessibility work, such as ePUB for ebooks, spreadsheets, mathematical equations, and sheet music. The authors talk about the challenges of each type of file or media and how a library may make them more accessible.

Chapter 6 touches on library communications and promotional materials, particularly for library events. The authors provide helpful tips on how to make social media posts more accessible, for example to reduce the use of emojis in social media posts because screen readers may not be able to interpret them in its intended use (p. 117). The chapter also lays out accessibility tips for emails, newsletters, online events, and signage (both physical and digital).

The scope of Chapter 7 is in manual and automatic accessibility testing. It also introduces the reader to VPATs (Voluntary Product Accessibility Testing), which is a quick reference to how accessible a product from a vendor may be. Although "voluntary" is in the acronym, more and more libraries are requiring them for accessibility review of products for purchasing decisions. The authors advise the reader to consider this information with caution, as it may not be entirely accurate, but acts as a base for accessibility testing and decision making (p. 137). For libraries feeling overwhelmed by the process, the authors also recommend reaching out to larger library systems or consortia for support (p. 138). The chapter closes with some

suggested free testing automatic testing tools that can give some starting points for improvement (p. 143-144).

Chapters 8 through 10 cover new technologies used in libraries. The authors discuss emerging technologies in Chapter 8. Libraries are often quick to adopt new technologies for their collections and services. Like online services, these technologies also need to meet accessibility requirements, and the authors remind the reader that they should build accessibility into workflows from the start, along with other technologies discussed in the book. Chapter 9 covers extended reality (XR), which includes virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) (p. 161). The authors define what each of these technologies are, how they can be used in libraries, and what their accessibility challenges can be, such as making physical movements to use some of the features (p. 168). Chapter 10 features the rapid expansion of AI and how it applies to libraries and accessibility. The chapter explains what AI is and how it differs from “virtual assistants” such as Siri and Alexa (p. 180-181). It also outlines the potential risks and benefits of using AI, and how it can be utilized (but not replace human intervention) in accessibility work. While AI is currently a divisive topic in librarianship, the balanced presentation of benefits and risks strengthens the chapter’s credibility.

The authors dedicate Chapter 11 to best practices with vendor relationships. Libraries have little control over the accessibility of third-party products like databases. As in other workflows discussed in the book, incorporating accessibility from the very beginning is essential when working with external vendors. Knowing from the beginning about how accessible a resource is can help with purchasing decisions and become part of the licensing process, such as reviewing VPATs. Keeping an open dialogue with the vendor and communicating issues is also crucial to the accessibility process.

Chapter 12 talks about the rise in disability due to an aging population of Baby Boomers and the effects of long COVID (p. 215-216). It also discusses how the library profession is evolving, yet the authors mention how MLIS programs are not keeping up with changes in preparing for accessibility in the field (p. 221). The chapter also looks at the need to update hiring practices to make them more accessible, for example “providing interview questions ahead of time” and accommodations such as a sign language interpreter (p. 224), as well as best practices for wording job postings.

Chapter 13 outlines how libraries can integrate accessibility into their workflows while on a tight budget. Some steps the authors suggest are looking into free resources and what accessibility features may currently be available on technology and resources the libraries already have, as well as researching new technologies before investing time and money. The chapter also talks about professional development and potential collaboration opportunities, as well as making the case for dedicated funding to improve and maintain accessibility.

The final chapter, Chapter 14, wraps up the book by summarizing the changing landscape of libraries. It also restates how overwhelming the task of bringing libraries up to accessibility standards can be but even making small changes can make a big difference.

The book's strength is the recurring theme of making library content as easily accessible to everyone as possible and meeting needs to the best of the library's ability, which should be how libraries meet their users where they are. The authors go in-depth about several aspects of accessibility that libraries should consider to not only become compliant with the new laws, but also to expand on points of accessibility for all its services. Accessibility, according to the authors, should not only extend to individuals with disabilities, but also for other accessibility purposes, like making websites usable on a mobile device, the reading and language comprehension level of a patron, or watching a video in a shared space and cannot have the volume on. Another strength is using examples at the start of the chapters and bringing in contributors at the end of the chapters to bring in real-life applications of the concepts. Additionally, the authors provide actionable items that can make easy changes towards improving accessibility, such as suggesting free accessibility tools and minor tweaks to social media posts and website layouts.

One area of concern is the book's target audience. The book would work better for libraries with a larger staff with a dedicated technology department or for employees that can execute decisions at the local level. While the book makes mention of public libraries, the suggestions throughout the book skew towards academic libraries, which is the background of both authors. For example, smaller public libraries, especially in rural areas, may not have in-house staff dedicated to back-end library work such as web design, negotiating licenses with vendors, or making decisions for electronic resources, which may be outsourced to a central library system or consortia. This may also be the case at smaller academic libraries but oftentimes their staff may include someone who handles these tasks on a smaller scale. While New York-based collaborations provide concrete examples, libraries outside the state may need to translate these models to align with local governance structures and legal frameworks.

The book heavily uses acronyms and abbreviations; however, the authors mitigate this by writing out what each one stands for when it is first introduced to the reader. Some examples include VPATs and organizations that lay out best practices like WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). They also provide a glossary at the end of the book for quick reference, as well as including both the acronyms and abbreviations along with the full name in the index. As someone who works in an area of librarianship that uses many abbreviations, the quick guide in the back of the book is especially helpful.

Overall, *The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries* is a strong foundational text for libraries beginning or formalizing accessibility efforts. It will be especially valuable for academic libraries and larger public libraries with dedicated technology or digital services staff.

Smaller libraries or those operating within centralized systems may find some recommendations aspirational rather than immediately actionable but will still benefit from the book's framework, terminology, and emphasis on incremental improvement.

References

Spina, C. & Albrecht Oling, R. (2025). *The digital accessibility handbook for libraries*. ALA Editions in collaboration with Core.