

Decolonial  
ARCHIVAL  
FUTURES

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# Decolonial ARCHIVAL FUTURES

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KRISTA MCCRACKEN AND SKYLEE-STORM HOGAN-STACEY  
FOREWORD BY RICARDO L. PUNZALAN



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## Series Editors

AMY COOPER CARY is Head of Special Collections and University Archives at Marquette University. She has served on editorial boards for *American Archivist*; *Archival Issues*; *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*; and *The Journal of Archival Organization*. She is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.

BETHANY ANDERSON is the Natural and Applied Sciences Archivist at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She serves as Editor-in-Chief for *Comma, International Journal on Archives* and previously served as Reviews Editor for *American Archivist*. Anderson has a master's degree in Information Studies with a specialization in Archival Studies and Records Management from the University of Texas at Austin and a master's in Near Eastern Art and Archaeology from the University of Chicago.

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# Contents

*Series Introduction* . . . vii

*Foreword* . . . ix

*Preface* . . . xiii

*Acknowledgments* . . . xix

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1	<b>Recognizing Colonial Frameworks</b>	<b>1</b>
	Colonial Archives in the United States . . . 3	
	Colonial Archives in Canada . . . 4	
	Colonial Archives in Australia . . . 6	
	Colonial Archives in New Zealand . . . 7	
	Moving Away from Colonial Archives . . . 9	
<hr/>		
2	<b>Archives and Cultural Protocols</b>	<b>13</b>
	UNDRIP and Archival Practice . . . 14	
	Protocols in the United States . . . 15	
	Protocols in Canada . . . 18	
	Protocols in Australia . . . 21	
	Protocols in New Zealand . . . 23	
	Protocols in Practice . . . 25	
<hr/>		
3	<b>Challenging Original Order and Provenance</b>	<b>31</b>
	Indigenous Provenance in the United States . . . 33	
	Indigenous Provenance in Canada . . . 35	
	Indigenous Provenance in Australia . . . 37	
	Indigenous Provenance in New Zealand . . . 38	
	Digital Approaches to Provenance . . . 40	

<b>4</b>	<b>Community-Based Archival Description</b>	<b>45</b>
	American Participatory Description and Community Archives ...	48
	Canadian Participatory Description and Community Archives ...	49
	Australian Participatory Description and Community Archives ...	51
	New Zealand Participatory Description and Community Archives ...	54
	Approaching Decolonizing Description ...	56

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<b>5</b>	<b>Indigenous Archival Futures</b>	<b>61</b>
	Areas for Transformation of Archival Practice ...	64

*Bibliography* ... 69

*About the Authors* ... 81

*Index* ... 83

# Series Introduction

**“WHAT’S PAST IS PROLOGUE”:** IN *THE TEMPEST*, SHAKESPEARE REMINDS us that our actions up to this very moment provide context for our present decisions and actions. The accrual of this activity, in the form of the archival record, enables us to reflect on that past with tangible evidence in hand (or on screen). But recorded evidence doesn’t just enable us to interrogate the present. We preserve the records and data of the present to provide evidence and context that will help us shape our collective future.

The Archival Futures series seeks to capture an irony that lies at the heart of the series title: Can what is past have a future, and vice versa? As a point of departure for critical thinking and for conversation, it centers the active role of archivists *and* everyday people in documenting society. Above all, it seeks to bring together all individuals who have a vested interest in cultural heritage and its stewardship, to both acknowledge and imagine the importance of the future archival record. This is a tall order.

When people find themselves without records and archives, memory, accountability, and transparency become precarious. We all share a collective, vested interest in the future of archives and must be partners in the preservation of the evidence of our present. Archivists act on behalf of the public good. Our work is focused outward and reflects the interests of many individuals and institutions. When archivists appraise records for enduring archival value, we imagine how people will use those materials; when archivists arrange and describe those records, we imagine how those descriptions might help people access important records; when archivists select technology and systems to serve as interfaces to our inventories and digital materials, we consider the ease

with which people can find critical information; when archivists preserve and provide access to records, we imagine how those records will provide context for complex issues to society in the future; and when archivists consider the constellation of digital content on the Web—social media, hosted systems, local systems—and the fragility and ephemeral nature of that content, we understand our vital roles as stewards for the historical record and our role in ensuring that these materials will exist in the future.

What makes this engagement of the archival record possible is a new approach to looking at the archival endeavor. By considering the work of archivists along with the theory that underpins that work, and by pairing that with ideas from contemporary trends in social theory, this series shows how the preservation and stewardship of the archival record is a collective effort that underpins and supports inclusive and democratic societies and institutions. Our current times stand as a watershed for transparency, authenticity, accountability, and representation. These values are bound to the responsible preservation of our historical materials, and everyone should be concerned with the processes by which we accomplish this.

The decision to preserve a historical record is also undertaken in conjunction with allied professionals, such as librarians, museum curators, and information scientists, and is fundamentally future oriented. As the contributions to this series reveal, the notion of an *archival future* underlies all discussions concerning the responsibility to promote the preservation of records that document the full range of human activity. Archival practice necessarily responds to the past, the present, and the future. Archival professionals imagine a future—whether in the next century or a week from now—and strive to support the use of records in that future, by people not yet known, for reasons not yet imagined.

Through the contributions to this series, we want to open the discussion about the future of the archival record. We enter into this with the understanding that the archival record of the past informs contemporary society and that archival practice is a collaborative endeavor—between archivists, librarians, and people. Our stake in the future is written in the records and archives that represent us and tell our stories to future generations. What is past is not simply prologue; what is present is not simply epilogue; the records of the now are vital to the future of human society.

Amy Cooper Cary  
Bethany Anderson



# Foreword

**“[WE] HAVE WORK TO DO”—WORK TO DECOLONIZE ARCHIVES AND** build better community relationships. With their deep engagement in grass-roots, Indigenous community archives, Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey know a thing or two about decolonial work and the liberative promise that this work holds for the future of archives—our collective future. And we—“archivists, the archives profession, and archival organizations”—must listen.<sup>1</sup> They are right when they say that “[we] have work to do,” and they show us the tools and ideas that we can use to accomplish the work of decolonization.

*Decolonial Archival Futures* outlines the contexts of, and paths toward, decolonization. We must respond with enthusiasm and action. The book traces colonial legacies of archives in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—countries that share related histories of settler colonialism. A notable contribution of this book is its comparative examination of the progress and challenges of these countries in the development and adoption of their respective protocols for stewarding Indigenous archival collections and building reciprocal relationships between institutions and source communities. McCracken and Hogan-Stacey pay close attention to implications of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in reshaping archival work, eschewing Western knowledge systems, and embracing Indigenous knowledge and values. They have established this comparative backdrop to argue for the necessity of expanding archival notions of provenance, original order, and, by extension, custody and ownership. More profoundly, their emphasis on the involvement of Indigenous communities in all aspects of archival work,

including participatory and reparative description, is a key step in Indigenizing archives and realizing a decolonial future.

I have a complicated and ambivalent relationship with archival ideas, having received my formative archival education in a former Spanish and American colony from a curriculum imported from US and European traditions. I began my career questioning the colonial foundations of archival thinking and the practices that those records encourage, but, at the same time, I believed in the power of archives and archivists to transform people's lives, histories, and imaginations. Over the years, I have seen the skepticism in embracing the message of community archives, the dismissive attitudes around reparative description, the outright belittling of community-based scholarship, and the objections to the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM). A common thread in all of these is that they all challenge professional canons of authority, control, and archival norms. As this book argues, we must learn how to confront our own discomfort in challenging colonial archival ideas. This is part and parcel of contemporary archival work that we all, not just a select some, must do to achieve a decolonial future.

Indeed, “[we] have work to do” when it comes to facilitating community engagement and establishing reciprocal relationships. I write this foreword after recently cofacilitating a visit of Filipino Indigenous artists to three repositories at the University of Michigan (U–M)—the Bentley Historical Library, the Special Collections Research Center, and the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology—as well as to the Newberry Library and the Field Museum in Chicago. The presence of Indigenous archives and material culture from the Philippines, as a former American colony, in the United States demonstrates and further complicates the issues discussed in this book considering the US histories of slavery, settler colonialism, and imperial expansions. For more than a century, archives and material culture that can be essential in sustaining cultural practices, languages, and relations have been far removed from the communities of the United States' former colony in the Pacific that need them most.

Bringing Indigenous culture bearers from the Cordillera region of the Northern Philippines—a basket weaver, a tattoo artist, and a textile master weaver—to examine and retrace the traditional artistic expressions of their ancestors showed U–M archivists and academics the power of direct community access and engagement. But even more, they showed the limitations of archival representation. As experts on their own history and culture, these visiting artists corrected many instances of misspellings, misattributions, and mislabels, thus underscoring McCracken and Hogan-Stacey's point about the crucial role of community experts in reshaping archival work, particularly in

the area of archival description. U–M’s archives, libraries, and museums could update our finding aids, but in some cases, we were not prepared to navigate the visitors’ emotions of such encounters despite numerous articles on archival trauma and re-traumatization in the reading room. Community collaboration and willingness to change harmful practices are particularly potent for the future work with Philippine archives that U–M hopes to do, namely building reciprocal stewardship relationships between Indigenous Filipinos, archivists, and archival repositories.

When there is harm, there is pain. McCracken and Hogan-Stacey are right when they say, “[we] have work to do” that will require “active engagement, difficult conversations, meaningful partnerships, and change.”<sup>2</sup> Encountering traditional aesthetics, patterns, and designs in photographs and manuscripts produced in the context of colonial administration and scholarship, which have been carefully preserved in US archives but inaccessible to communities they document, brought up complex emotions with our Filipino visiting artists. On one hand, these materials were gathered or produced at the height of colonial rule, and they indeed reflect the period when they were used to justify colonialism and racist policies, but they are also sources for examining cultural/historical knowledge of many communities in the present.

In my pursuit of community-based research that facilitates access and use of archives, I have seen firsthand the discomfort and pain of relying on colonial records to retrace or sustain traditional knowledge. Indigenous cultural expressions and lifeways have been a frequent target of (unsuccessful) colonial annihilation. We have so much work to do to support, honor, and celebrate the survivance<sup>3</sup> of Indigenous communities, despite continuing legacies of unspeakable colonial violence. McCracken and Hogan-Stacey begin to explore the many layers of work that will be required. An unknown, and often unacknowledged, record of Indigenous Peoples’ cultural memory is kept in archival repositories, stewarded in some cases by archivists who lack sufficient cultural knowledge about them or the resources to ethically represent that knowledge. There are times when we must acknowledge that despite (and often, because of) our best intentions and allegiance to professional standards, we fail and (un)wittingly replicate harm to communities. After reading this book, it will be more difficult for anyone to take a neutral stance or adhere to principles and practices that our scholarship has proven to be, at best, out of touch with our changing cultural, social, and technical landscapes.

I believe in the message of *Decolonial Archival Futures*. Archives are as much about the past as about their significance in the present. We must act now so we have some hope of creating the decolonial archival futures that we want. Where there is harm, we must work diligently toward repair. When community

perspectives are ignored, we must adopt more inclusive description and policies. When community access is systemically denied, archivists must question these policies and, when possible and appropriate, cede control. And because archival thinking and policy are colonial, we must work toward transformation and Indigenization. This book underscores the first steps to repair the many decades of lack of community control over archives and to build the relationships that are a necessary foundation for a reciprocal model of stewardship. We have work to do.

*Ricardo L. Punzalan*  
*University of Michigan School of Information*

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## NOTES

1. Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey, *Decolonial Archival Futures* (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman and Society of American Archivists, 2023), 61.
2. McCracken and Hogan-Stacey, *Decolonial Archival Futures*, 61.
3. See Gerald Robert Vizenor's *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), and *Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).