

EDITORIAL

Community Archives and the Right to Narrate

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Institutional archives often describe community collections as sources that correct an incomplete historical record. The claim is valid but insufficient. It positions the established repository as the natural center of memory and the community archive as supplementary evidence waiting to be incorporated. Community archives challenge that center. They demonstrate that archival value can be defined outside state, university, or national institutions and that people have legitimate interests in controlling the records through which they become historically visible.

The relevant right is not simply a right to appear in someone else's catalog. It is a right to narrate: to identify meaningful events, retain vernacular categories, connect records to living knowledge, and decide when circulation would cause harm. This right includes disagreement within communities. No group speaks with one voice, and no archive can represent every member equally. The answer is not to abandon community authority but to build procedures that make internal difference discussable and decisions revisable.

Archival description may appear technical, yet every description creates a frame. A folder title, subject heading, date range, or biographical note suggests what a record is about and which relationships deserve attention. Terms inherited from earlier administrative systems can reproduce the prejudices of the institutions that produced them. Conversely, replacing those terms without documentation can hide the history of classification.

Community-led description offers a way forward. It can place official terminology beside self-description, explain

why a term is contested, and preserve local linguistic or cultural distinctions. Such work should be credited as intellectual contribution. It is not merely "cleaning metadata." It changes the conditions under which future researchers interpret evidence.

Plural description also requires humility about consistency. Standardization supports discovery, but complete uniformity can erase difference. A responsible system can maintain interoperable fields while providing space for community-specific knowledge, narrative notes, multiple languages, and uncertainty. The objective is not a perfect final description; it is a transparent and accountable one.

Universities and cultural institutions frequently offer digitization, storage, or public visibility to community archives. These resources may be valuable, but partnerships become extractive when institutions acquire copies, publicity, or research opportunities while communities carry the labor of identification and consent. Agreements should therefore address ownership, control of copies, permitted uses, commercial reuse, withdrawal, attribution, storage costs, and the fate of records after a grant ends.

Capacity building should be designed around the community's goals. An institution may prefer a sophisticated database, while a community may need basic environmental storage, paid staff time, oral-history training, or a simple backup system. Technical ambition is not the same as usefulness. The most responsible contribution may be to strengthen an archive where it is rather than transfer it elsewhere.

Partnerships should also recognize the legitimacy of boundaries. Open access

is not an absolute ethical good. Some records concern sacred knowledge, vulnerable persons, family conflict, or experiences shared for a limited purpose. Restriction can express care rather than secrecy. The UNESCO framework for intangible cultural heritage is instructive in emphasizing the role of communities in identifying and safeguarding their own heritage.

Digital preservation is often described through formats, backups, and migration. These are essential, but community archives also need durable governance. Who can make access decisions? How are new custodians selected? What happens when a founding member leaves? How will disagreements be recorded? A technically preserved collection may still become unusable if no legitimate decision-making process survives.

Funders should support administrative continuity, not only digitization outputs. Small unrestricted grants, paid coordination, legal advice, training, and succession planning can be more consequential than another public interface. Evaluation should ask whether a project increased community control and institutional capacity, not only how many items were scanned.

Community archives should not be approached as waiting rooms for records that will eventually enter established institutions. They are institutions of memory in their own right. Their value lies not only in the histories they preserve but in the authority they exercise over how history is produced. Respecting the right to narrate requires partnerships that accept community-defined priorities, visible credit, negotiated access, and the possibility that some records should remain locally governed or partially closed.