THE REMATRIATION PROJECT

Building Capacity for Community Digital Archiving in Northwest Alaska

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Abstract – Directed by an Inuit-led and serving tribal organization, Aqqaluk Trust, in the frontline hub-community of Kotzebue, Alaska, the Rematriation Project: Restoring and Sharing Inuit Knowledges aims to create capacity for and access to digital archives related to Inuit cultural, tribal, and scientific knowledges and history to assist tribes and communities in developing localized, culturally appropriate approaches and solutions to their needs. In partnership with a team of scholars from Virginia Tech (itself led by an Iñupiaq scholar from Kotzebue)— the goal of this project is to empower Indigenous communities through the lens of Indigenous data and research sovereignty to collect, control, interpret, and benefit from data that originates from their communities. The Rematriation Project operates on a foundation of community-first, community-led decision making that emphasizes Indigenous Data Sovereignty practices. This paper outlines the goals and initiatives of the first phases of the project.

Keywords – Community Archives, Preservation, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, Capacity Building, Equitable Research

Conference Topics – Digital Accessibility, Inclusion, and Diversity; Sustainability: Real and Imagined

I. INTRODUCTION

As Cree-Métis scholar and librarian, Jessie Loyer, expresses in *The Collector and the Collected*, "Who has the authority to own and manage collections? … Who is granted the credibility to disseminate this information? … Indigenous communities have too often had restricted access to the information created about them and have largely been absent from the process of dissemination of these knowledges [1]. Scholars of research data stewardship and digital preservation have acknowledged the gaps between Indigenous data sovereignty and best practices for open and accessible research data with the development of the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance [2]. Extractive data practices and research methods have multifaceted impacts on communities and perpetuate colonialist and inequitable power differentials [3], [4].

Climate scientists gather and preserve massive amounts of data each year from Arctic Indigenous lands. This data powers the dominant research data lifecycle model. Although several variations of the data lifecycle exist, the basic scaffolding: acquire, process, analyze, archive, disseminate, and reuse/delete, have largely become the standard practice of institutional researchers [5], [6]. The Research Data Lifecycle supports the needs of researchers and excludes Indigenous communities from exercising data sovereignty—to have ownership over the data; to consent and control how it is used; determine who has, or can have, access to it; and decide how, where, and for how long that data will be stored [1], [7], [8].

Given this research landscape, what does it mean to be a steward of community memories and archives in 2023, especially during the climate crisis?

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For the partners of the Rematriation Project, it means to respectfully and equitably help Indigenous communities access, engage, and preserve cultural knowledge to fulfill their self-determined needs and goals, such as accessing and consulting traditional knowledges to determine culturally-appropriate responses to climate change.

II.   THE REMATRIATION PROJECT

Directed by an Inuit-led and serving tribal organization, Aqqaluk Trust, in the frontline hub-community of Kotzebue, Alaska, the Rematriation Project: Restoring and Sharing Inuit Knowledges aims to create capacity for and access to digital archives related to Inuit cultural, tribal, and scientific knowledges and history to assist tribes and communities in developing localized, culturally appropriate approaches and solutions to their needs. In partnership with a team of scholars from the Virginia Tech Department of English and University Libraries (itself led by an Iñupiaq scholar from Kotzebue)—the goal of this project is to empower Indigenous communities through the lens of Indigenous data and research sovereignty to collect, control, interpret, and benefit from data that originates from their communities. This project began from a series of informal conversations about community needs in relation to community experiences with academic research between researchers and Aqqaluk Trust staff [9]. Through these conversations, it was determined that community digital archiving needs existed in the region, and that the process and skills related to digital archiving complemented other community goals and needs [9].

Kotzebue is a rural Iñupiat coastal community located above the Arctic Circle that serves as a central location for ten surrounding villages. This region is currently facing the devastating effects of rapidly accelerating climate change. Tribal communities are encountering more frequent destructive storms, fire, and flooding, putting them and their tribal histories and land stewardship at great risk. It is imperative to create accessible, digital versions of valuable and threatened knowledges. Creating digital archives is one part of the solution, developing local capacities for digital archiving is another.

The Rematriation Project fulfills these needs for the Iñupiat of NW Alaska and also provides a transferable model and materials for other communities to use for their own self-determined needs. In order to accomplish project objectives, partners center the needs and values of the community so that community members are able to make informed decisions about:

- with whom and how to share their knowledge,

- the consequences and impacts of making Inuit knowledge interoperable with other dataset and collections in a digital environment, and

- culturally appropriate and meaningful arrangement and description.

III.   CENTERING COMMUNITY

Alaska Native (Unangax) scholar, Dr. Eve Tuck, describes Rematriation as "… concerned with the redistribution of power, knowledge, and the dismantling of settler colonialism" [10]. Rematriation encompasses Indigenous-led methods of data sovereignty as well as restoring (and sharing) cultural knowledges back with Indigenous peoples. As this methodology grounds the project, partners and team members work under a community-first approach, which focuses on building trusting relationships and partnerships within the team and community, centers community-needs and values, and implements community-led/advised decision making.

The first step in the project team's methodology has been to engage Cultural Humility as a framework [11], prior to beginning any research or activities. Cultural Humility is the continuous process of reflection and self-evaluation of your history, background and objectives; a committed renewal to learning from the community, challenging your own biases and beliefs, and restoring imbalances; and holding yourself accountable in understanding how your history, biases, and beliefs influence your actions and impact the community [12], [13]. Although much of this work is an internal process, the project team operationalizes the Cultural Humility framework through open dialog and discussions in weekly check-in meetings. These meetings not only give the team the opportunity to discuss upcoming initiatives but understand how this work, and our roles within the work, benefits the community and supports its values and self-determined needs. This approach leads to strengthened relationships within the team prior to

visiting communities for "official" research activities, and included an informal, relationship-building community visit in April 2023. The weekly check-in meetings are also instrumental in conceptualizing a community-led and developed digital archive and culturally appropriate archival curriculum. Part of these meetings is dedicated to a discussion of Iñupiat Ilitqusiat, Inupiat cultural values, and how they can be foregrounded in the Rematriation Project's work.

IV. REMATRIATION PROJECT GOALS

As the NW Arctic region faces the devastating effects of rapidly accelerating climate change, it is critical that communities not only have the resources to preserve their knowledge but retain, recover, and utilize the data collected by academic institutions. The Rematriation Project has developed a multi-phase process to accomplish its goals in creating capacity for and access to digital archives related to Inuit culture and knowledges:

A. Digitize tribal materials from Kotzebue to create a scalable model for community digital archiving.

With the help of the digitization lab at Virginia Tech Libraries, the team has digitized a small collection of papers and other artifacts of the deceased Siberian Yupik leader, Caleb Pungowiyi. These materials were donated to this project by the Pungowiyi family in Kotzebue and Caleb Scholars Program and are currently located at Virginia Tech. After the digitization is complete, the Pungowiyi materials and corresponding data will be returned to his family in Kotzebue, following a post-custodial and collaborative model for community archives. This collection provides the team with strong examples for our work that can be scaled by Aqqaluk Trust and others to meet future and broader rematriation needs.

Caleb Pungowiyi worked tirelessly to have Indigenous perspectives, needs, and knowledges included as part of major policy discussions about climate change and other conservation issues. His impact on policy discussion included the US Marine Mammal Commission and the Arctic Council, and his voice still resonates across Arctic advocacy and research circles. Pungowiyi's materials are a rich source of information about climate change and Indigenous methods of recognizing and adapting to climate change. They contain specific scientific knowledge of Inuit homelands and its changes over time that complement and extend western science. Access to these materials is culturally powerful, scientifically significant, and of critical importance to the future of the region. The Pungowiyi collection provides a strong model of the types of materials and knowledge resources that exist in Inuit communities—materials that need to be digitally preserved and accessible.

B. Increase community capacities in digital archiving and data literacies through the creation of guides and curriculum, including cataloging metadata and using existing online archival tools.

The project team is developing a series of storyboard scripts and user personas and scenarios to construct a culturally-appropriate curriculum for creating, contributing to, and using community digital archives. As with our approach to the Pungowiyi collection, the team is seeking to incorporate concepts and frameworks from educational leadership, archives and cultural heritage sectors, and the growing body of literature on cross-functional teams and team-based collaborations in the Arctic.

Culturally appropriate instruction in community archiving must address intersecting interests and needs. For example, the interests of the project team in sharing our work with other researchers and archives practitioners and the needs and rights of the community to protect culturally sensitive traditional knowledges. Descriptive and structural metadata must be meaningful to the community, as it enables users to navigate and make sense of the digital collection. Co-creating both a workflow for and standards to guide metadata creation and management that is appropriate for the community is a more complex process than selecting a metadata standard to adopt and implement whole-scale. As the team has discussed and developed metadata work, we have had to adopt a system agnostic, principles-based approach. We are continuously interrogating metadata tools and practices that have wide adoption in libraries and archives but are not necessarily in alignment with community needs or goals. As the community begins to digitize their own materials, it will help in communicating the important cultural, contextual, and historical information about each object. It is important to emphasize that the Rematriation Project was established with a strong commitment to Indigenous

Data Sovereignty. Unlike other models for post-custodial archives, any data generated throughout or after the project, including digitized materials, will adhere to the principles of CARE and OCAP [2, 8], meaning that the community has ownership, control, and possession of the digitized materials and data. The pilot collection was digitized at the University Libraries to serve as a teaching and training model, and the community will determine who can have access to the information generated from the digitization and description of the materials. Further, the protection of traditional and Indigenous Knowledges in relation to data and "Intellectual Property" has been formalized in legal contracts between Virginia Tech and Aqqaluk Trust.

In order to develop the curriculum to support the community throughout the digitization and archival process, the team will use the "I do, we do, you do" differentiated learning method: *I do*, demonstrate the digitization of a model post-custodial collection, the Pungowiyi papers; *We do*, work together to develop community workshops to identify and prepare materials for supporting the digitization of community archives; and *you do*, provide support while pilot participants work with their own materials and apply their learning toward their development as trainers [14]. This model is also consistent with Inuit cultural practices of education and experiential learning.

This is a method of instruction that can be especially useful in establishing relationships with community members that can evolve over time—from introducing a concept, a model, and an example; working together towards a common goal of contributing to a community archive; and providing support into the future as participants gain the experience and confidence to initiate and sustain projects with or without partners.

C. *Use community digital archives to design and test an online library (i.e., a website that hosts local digitized materials, provides access to existing archives, and can track new research requests) that is specifically created for Inuit users to access community databases and connects outside researchers to community liaisons.*

Although the process of designing and testing a NW Arctic Cultural Digital Library falls in the third phase of the project, currently the team is conducting a landscape analysis of websites and digital archives with similar missions to understand what features organizations are using, on what platforms these sites are built on, and how they perform in a broadband environment similar to what the communities experience in Alaska. So far, 50 digital archives have been analyzed for design and organization of content; performance on smaller mobile screens and lower bandwidth connections; and accessibility features, such as how they help visually-impaired users or not. From this exercise, the team will move into the next phase, engaging with various projects from the analysis to gain insights into user and administrator experiences. The team will ultimately create a presentation for the community that discusses build options, including costs, data storage, security features, data backup and recovery, and user experience and engagement features. The objective is to present multiple approaches for constructing the archive, with a strong focus on protecting community data and ensuring long-term data sovereignty. This is a further extension of post-custodial archival practice, in which the community partnership with the University Libraries extends beyond the digitization of a collection to also include consultation, training, and support that seeks to be responsive to community needs.

V. CONCLUSION

Researchers have traveled to Iñupiat lands to study the environment and culture for decades. These knowledges have not always been shared back with communities in ways that can be easily accessed, understood, or used to help with the community's self-determined needs. A vast amount of Indigenous knowledges currently live behind academic paywalls and are owned and controlled by academic institutions.

Within communities, Iñupiat traditional knowledges are documented in various ways and stored in homes, schools, and organizational buildings. However, these collections are scattered and in jeopardy of loss from housing and building insecurity, deteriorating infrastructure, mold, inadequate storage, and environmental crises. Making accessible digital versions of these valuable and threatened knowledges is imperative. The goal of the Rematriation Project is to provide Iñupiat communities with targeted, culturally appropriate

capacity building that hones, develops, and complements local skills related to digital archiving and digital literacies as well as to produce a transferrable protocol for researchers that prioritizes Indigenous data and research sovereignty, which communities can use for their own self-determined needs. The creation of the NW Arctic Cultural Digital Library will establish a platform and a space for publishers to begin the work of returning Inuit cultural knowledges back to their people.

The Rematriation Project operates on a foundation of community-first, community-led decision making that emphasizes Indigenous Data Sovereignty practices. Community workshops are a critical part of building strong, long-lasting relationships and trust. The ultimate goal of the Rematriation Project is to build capacity for community digital archiving in Kotzebue and to the surrounding villages. The digitization and creation of the Pungowiyi digital collection has been our way of working towards this goal. The pilot collection also gives the project team and community members a benchmark for scaling future digital projects. Part of the process of building and participating in the workshops is to support community participants in developing and exercising digital literacy skills that can be transferable to future projects and support the community in making self-directed decisions about data stewardship.

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