



## Distinguished Seminar Series



# Dr. Kimberly Christen

OCLC Kilgour Auditorium

Dublin, Ohio

July 13, 2017

The [event](#) featured Dr. Kimberly Christen, Director of the Digital Initiatives for the College of Arts and Sciences and the Director of the Center for Digital Scholarship and Curation at Washington State University. In her presentation, Dr. Christen interrogated the notion that library and archive practices are neutral and non-biased, traced the often-violent histories of collecting and the construction of the public domain, unpacked their connections to the foundations of libraries and archives, and provided a framework for ethical engagements and reciprocal practices through culturally responsive tools and engagements.

Use this viewing guide to expand your learnings from the talk. Take notes, reflect, and use the guide to frame discussions you would like to have with colleagues and peers, and plan for your next steps.

## We have never been neutral

“That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density in any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation.”

—Thomas Jefferson, [letter to Isaac McPherson](#) (1813)

## REFLECTION

Consider the [colonial agendas](#) driving the methods and history of collecting that Dr. Christen discusses. How does this inform your view of the idea (captured in Jefferson's quote) of knowledge as neutral, and devoid of social, cultural, or territorial roots? What does Jefferson's concept of neutrality and knowledge erase? What communities and groups might have a different perspective on this and why?

Legal scholar Angela Riley, in a 2016 [article](#), describes Indian appropriation as “the process by which the US legal system has historically facilitated and normalized the taking of *all* things Indian for others’ use, from lands to sacred objects, and from bodies to identities.”

## REFLECTION

Think about the cultural heritage materials in non-Indigenous archives, libraries, and museums. What was their significance to the communities from which they were taken? When these materials were collected, to what extent were Indigenous communities’ rights and relationships regarding these materials respected?

Today, what kinds of relationships do Indigenous communities have to their cultural heritage materials in non-Indigenous archives, libraries, and museums? What kind of relationship *should* there be? What should—and what could—cultural heritage institutions do to facilitate these relationships?

## Search, discovery, and the politics of access

“The colonial collecting project was a destructive mechanism by which Indigenous cultural materials were removed from communities and detached from those local knowledge systems. Much of this material remains today, not only physically distant from local communities, but also lodged within information systems that steadfastly refused local claims to stewardship, whether through a rights field or from marginalization in a notes field.”

—Dr. Kimberly Christen, [OCLC DSS presentation \(2017\)](#)

## REFLECTION

Consider contemporary practices around search, discovery, and access. How do they reflect historical notions of openness and neutrality? What are the ways in which they sustain dispossession of traditional knowledges and systematic erasures? What are responsible, ethical ways of thinking about search?

As stewards of cultural heritage materials, what are our responsibilities, and to whom? Is there necessarily a tension between access for researchers and ethical responsibilities to the communities that originally owned and created the materials? Consider the end goal: is it to simply serve out quantities of information, or is the desired goal to share knowledge ethically and responsibly? For the latter, consider the processes that would lead to ethical, accurate, updated, and contextually rich knowledge that provides the potential for sharing knowledge and experiences within a decolonial framework.

Dr. Christen proposes reframing library/structural processes and workflows so that:

access = accountability

discovery = reciprocity

search = engagements

## REFLECTION

What is lost when materials are removed from their original, local contexts, and then shared and used for purposes that were never intended? What could be gained when materials are reconnected with the Indigenous communities they came from, and reflect the perspectives of those with traditional knowledge about them?

What can non-Indigenous cultural heritage institutions do to acknowledge and respect the local contexts and relationships associated with the materials in their collections?

## Models

Traditional Knowledge (TK) Labels and Mukurtu CMS are two platforms that provide models for reframing current practice around search, discovery, and access.

### Traditional Knowledge labels

A system to support the management of the intellectual property of Indigenous, local, and traditional communities. Much like Fairtrade labels, TK labels provide additional information so people can make informed decisions about their use reuse and circulation.

<http://localcontexts.org/tk-labels/>

[Tribal Archives, Traditional Knowledge, and Local Contexts: Why the “s” Matters](#)

### Mukurtu

Mukurtu CMS is an open source content management system and community access platform designed to meet the needs of Indigenous communities. Mukurtu (“safe keeping place”) is built on the idea that there are ethical ways of relating to tangible and intangible forms of knowledge grounded in physical places relationships and enduring social systems.

<http://mukurtu.org/>

[A Community of Relations: Mukurtu Hubs and Spokes](#)

### REFLECTION

What are the principles underpinning these tools and models? What are the benefits of incorporating these ideas about knowledge, neutrality, search/discovery/access into the current practices of cultural heritage institutions?

What conversations do you want to have around these ideas and who do you want to have them with? What practical steps can you take to implement some of the ideas that Mukurtu and the TK Labels embody?

## Examples

Dr. Christen highlights several examples demonstrating the impact of the implementation of these models. Here are two to explore:

### **Warm Springs Duck Basket** (*see recording starting at 35:50*)

In the [Plateau Peoples' Web Portal](#) (built using Mukurtu CMS) the institutional metadata for a [Root Gathering Bag](#) in the Northwest Museum of Art and Culture's collections is displayed alongside the Warm Springs community's record about the item, which community members call a Duck Basket. The Warm Springs's record incorporates cultural narratives about the item and includes a video in which we hear traditional language and stories.

<https://plateauportal.libraries.wsu.edu/digital-heritage/root-gathering-bag-3>

### **Ancestral Voices Project** (*see recording starting at 42:00*)

This is a collaboration of the Passamaquoddy Tribe of Maine, the American Folklife Center (Library of Congress), Washington State University, and New York University. Passamaquoddy elders have provided cultural narratives and added traditional knowledge about the stories and songs captured on wax cylinder recordings created in 1890 that are in Library of Congress collections. The [record](#) displays TK labels and explanations of them so that information seekers are better informed about ethical use of these materials.

<https://loc.gov/item/2015655578>

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/ancestral-voices/about-this-collection/>

## REFLECTION

Consider these examples. What happened when the Warm Springs and Passamaquoddy communities were engaged in the curation workflows? What do you imagine might have been the impact on the Indigenous communities? What are the benefits of this for the institutions, and for researchers and the information-seeking public?

How could you make room for this kind of community engagement and these kinds of narratives in your curation workflows? What are the most compelling aspects of these examples of collaborative curation?

## Decolonizing collecting institutions

“To begin decolonizing libraries and archives, to undo the territorial and cultural dispossessions upon which they are built, we must start by changing the structures we have at all levels to reflect accountability, engagement, and reciprocity.”

—Dr. Kimberly Christen, OCLC DSS presentation (2017)

Dr. Christen outlines some practical steps to make changes at the structural level:

- Create [Memorandums of Understanding \(MOU\)](#) at an institutional level with native nations as part of your institution’s collections and research policies.
- Add steps to your metadata creation workflows around metadata creation that account for multiple voices in your collections.
- Update your access policies to reflect support for varied access parameters based on cultural sovereignty and histories of erasure.
- Work with Indigenous stakeholders to add TK Labels to public domain materials and lobby for content management systems to include a TK Label field.

## REFLECTION

How might you incorporate these practical steps into your institution’s policies and workflows? How might you incorporate these into what *you* do? How might rethinking practices provide opportunities for engaging with the community and adding valuable context to materials in your collections?

## Steps toward change

“Making a systemic change is a slow process but it is one that brings us to the humanistic endeavor that libraries and archives can create one that values meaningful engagements over products whereby we create relationships not records.”

—Dr. Kimberly Christen, OCLC DSS presentation (2017)

While changes at the structural level might be a longer-term goal, there are practical steps you can take now to work toward more ethical and responsible practice around collections of Indigenous materials.

## LEARN

- Explore the resources provided at the end of this guide.
- Identify what you need to know or learn to intentionally cultivate accountability and/or continue to respectfully steward responsible relationships with the communities your institution serves.

## ENGAGE

- Engage Indigenous stakeholders. Be willing to talk to multiple groups within tribal nations and be willing to go *to* them. Most important, *listen*. Hear and understand their needs and concerns.
- Attend the [International Conference of Indigenous Archives, Libraries, and Museums](#) to hear and learn from the perspectives of tribal archivists, librarians, and curators.
- How will you engage and listen?

## SHARE AND DISCUSS

- What are some of the most compelling aspects of Dr. Christen's talk? Raise awareness among colleagues and peers by engaging in thoughtful reflection and discussion around these topics. Schedule a viewing session and discussion with colleagues; read related articles and host a journal club discussion; organize conference sessions that provide opportunities to explore these issues.
- Consider how to help others know and respect traditional knowledge. Identify ways to educate researchers, patrons, and community members about these issues.
- What kind of relationship does your institution have with the Indigenous communities associated with your collections? What could you as an individual do to work toward a more collaborative, community curation approach? What could be done at the institutional level? What about cultural heritage institutions collectively?
- Dr. Christen's talk and examples highlight her experience working with Indigenous communities, but the principles of respect and reciprocity embedded in the community curation approach are broadly applicable. Who are some other communities and groups that your institution works with where these principles could be applied? What are some other narratives and histories that have been systematically erased that need to be seen, heard, and respected?

## Continuing the conversation

Dr. Christen's presentation sparked plenty of conversation—online via Twitter and in-person with some Q&A. Explore the questions and comments and consider these additional points to reflect on and discuss.

### TWITTER

Follow the Twitter thread:

<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23oclcdss%20since%3A2017-07-10%20until%3A2017-08-31&src=sav>

### FROM THE Q&A

*(condensed and edited for clarity and length)*

**Q:** What are your thoughts on aggregation?

**KC:** For aggregators the danger is relying on the notion that the goal is more content. I don't enable the narrative that more is better—that more content means *knowing* more. Instead, have a conversation with a living human being today. Scraping up and reproducing bad, outdated, inaccurate metadata helps no one. I would challenge aggregators to use ethical workflows instead of just hoovering up content.

**Q:** These ideas seem applicable to other populations and narratives in addition to Indigenous communities. Who is doing this work with other communities?

**KC:** Yes, there are lots of people in critical library and archive studies. The notion of protocols and the sociality of knowledge are not unique to Indigenous communities. I recommend work by [Jarrett Drake](#), [Bergis Jules](#), and [Michelle Caswell](#).

**Q:** What else can those of us at universities, libraries, and archives do to be mindful of these issues?

**KC:** Sit down and listen to stakeholder communities. Understand their needs and concerns and think about ethics. Sharing some of this cultural material is wrong. Pay special attention to ethics with research involving native communities. Don't simply share stuff online with takedown notices. It replays the colonial violence. Practice consultation—put more of your research money and resources into consultation.

Recognize that we can't uproot ourselves from this history—we're all placed in it. Start at the structural level but don't let barriers discourage you. What can you do at the metadata level, at the workflow level? What can *you* do? This is about process not products. I really believe that libraries and archives are humanistic endeavors. Let's going back to being human beings. *What can we do with our collections that will benefit the communities from which they came?*

# Resources

## FURTHER READING

By Dr. Kimberly Christen:

2018. “[Relationships not Records: Digital Heritage and the Ethics of Sharing Indigenous Knowledge Online](#).” In Jentery Sayers (ed.), *Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*. New York: Taylor and Francis.

<http://www.kimchristen.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/41christenKimberly.pdf>

2017. With Alex Merrill and Michael Wynne, “A Community of Relations: Mukurtu Hubs and Spokes.” *D-Lib Magazine* 23, no. 5/6.

<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may17/christen/05christen.html>

2015. “On Not Looking. Economies of Visuality in Digital Museums.” In Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips (eds.), *International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Transformations*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

[http://www.kimchristen.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Christen\\_On\\_not\\_looking\\_205.pdf](http://www.kimchristen.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Christen_On_not_looking_205.pdf)

2015. “Tribal Archives, Traditional Knowledge, and Local Contexts: Why the “s” Matters.” *Journal of Western Archives* 6, no. 1, art. 3.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://www.kimchristen.com/publications/&httpsredir=1&article=1046&context=westernarchives>

Additional publications by Dr. Christen

<http://www.kimchristen.com/publications/>

Additional reading:

Caswell, Michelle, & Punzalan, Ricardo. 2016. “Archives and Human Rights: Questioning Notions of Information and Access.” *Perspectives on Libraries as Institutions of Human Rights and Social Justice*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Insight Advances in Librarianship Series.

<https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/S0065-283020160000041012>

Caswell, Michelle; Punzalan, Ricardo; & Sangwand, T. Kay. 2017. “Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2. <http://libraryjuicepress.com/journals/index.php/jcls/article/view/50/30>

Drake, Jarret M. on *Medium*

<https://medium.com/@jmddrake>

Jules, Bergis on *Medium*

<https://medium.com/@BergisJules>

Riley, Angela, & Carpenter, Kristen A. 2016. "Owning Red: A Theory of Indian (Cultural) Appropriation." *Texas Law Review* 94, no. 5.  
[https://texaslawreview.org/owning\\_red/](https://texaslawreview.org/owning_red/)

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai; Metoyer, Cheryl A.; Doyle, Ann M.; Lilley, Spencer C., et al. 2015. Indigenous Knowledge Organization issue. *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 53, no. 5-6, 2015.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/wccq20/53/5-6>

## EXAMPLES

[Digital Dynamics Across Cultures](#)

[Jesse Walter Fewkes collection of Passamaquoddy cylinder recordings](#), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

[Plateau People's Web Portal](#)

[Warm Springs Community Record for Duck Basket](#)

[Additional projects, Dr. Christen](#)

## RESOURCES

[Educational Resources from Local Contexts](#)

[Intellectual Property](#)

[International Conference of Indigenous Archives, Libraries, and Museums](#)

[Local Contexts](#)

[Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) Templates](#)

[Sustainable Heritage Network](#)

[Additional presentations, Dr. Christen](#)

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