

Old Dominion University

ODU Digital Commons

English Faculty Publications

English

11-2020

Afterlives of Indigenous Archives: Essays in Honor of "The Occom Circle" [Book Review]

Drew Lopenzina

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Afterlives of Indigenous Archives: Essays in Honor of "The Occom Circle." Edited by Ivy Schweitzer and Gordon Henry. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2019. Pp. x+248.

Afterlives of Indigenous Archives takes its title from Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor who is, in turn, repurposing a quote from French theorist Jacques Derrida who, in his 1995 work, *Archive Fever*, referred to the archive as that which gestures toward "an excess of life," something that "resists annihilation" (183). This excess, or "afterlife," of the archive remains, for Vizenor at least, an unexpected location of Indigenous survivance—a site from which, despite every violent attempt to colonially contain and collapse Native presence, it is still possible to carry something forward from the ruins of representation. With this in mind, *Afterlives* offers a collection of essays from scholars who either study, curate, or produce Indigenous archives, providing a useful roadmap of how the archive might serve as a site for furthering Indigenous scholarship and Indigenous stories of survivance in the twenty-first century.

The collection takes as its starting point the recently launched Occom Circle Project, a digitized collection of documents relating to the life of eighteenth-century Mohegan preacher Samson Occom. The Occom Circle Project is housed and maintained at Dartmouth College, a colonial archive itself, which holds, among other things, most everything Occom wrote in his lifetime. In 2016 Indigenous studies scholars from varied disciplines came together in Hanover to discuss the complex issues and possible positive outcomes that arise from keeping, curating, and studying Indigenous archives. While I am sometimes wary of collections that cull their contents from conference proceedings, *Afterlives* proves a thoughtful,

Modern Philology, volume 118, number 2. Published online August 19, 2020
For permission to reuse, please contact journalpermissions@press.uchicago.edu.

illuminating, and generative enquiry into the problems posed by engaging with these materials.

Contemporary Indigenous scholarship maintains an uneasy relationship with this thing we call “the archive.” As Melanie Benson Taylor openly admits in her foreword to the collection, “The truth is that I don’t trust the archives” (x). And for good reason. The archive, as generally understood, is a colonial construction—a site upon which the paper trail of conquest is blazed, paved, preserved, cataloged, indexed, and safeguarded for posterity. Because most of what is contained in these repositories has been produced by the dominant settler culture, Native presence in the archive has always been subject to deeply entrenched biases and interpretations. With stunning historical consistency, reams of documents have been produced with no other purpose than to eliminate all trace of Native occupancy on the land. And even when Native authors have, themselves, contributed to the written record of their lives under a settler regime, their works have largely been shaped and determined by the expectations and norms of western print discourse. As coeditor of the collection Ivy Schweitzer observes, “By imposing Western forms of literacy on indigenous populations, settler colonists elevated writing, and the archives that preserved it, into the pre-eminent tool of conquest” (3).

Afterlives, nevertheless, responds to a recent turn to the archive in Indigenous studies—a movement that found its impetus in an emerging generation of Native scholars such as Lisa Brooks, Jean O’Brien, Jennifer O’Neal, Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Scott Stevens, and others who privilege Native traditions, culture, and memory over colonial forms of history keeping. This reclaiming of Indigenous sources of knowledge has opened up an epistemological reentry point into the archive, providing willing scholars a set of tools with which to decolonize the texts and artifacts long sequestered there under colonial control. A prime example of this is the Occom Circle Project itself, which, as envisioned by its founder, Schweitzer, was the creation of a digital archive that “would approximate the multiple transatlantic and transcultural networks of association that constituted Occom’s world.” Whereas settler colonial history has traditionally located Occom’s narrative in the orbit of Dartmouth founder, Eleazar Wheelock, Schweitzer, working in collaboration with indigenous stakeholders, has attempted to create a platform that places a “Native figure at the center” of the story (7).

The contributions to this collection work in a similar fashion, outlining proper protocols for engaging with Indigenous materials while also making readily apparent the complexity involved when such materials remain embedded in colonial systems of curation. Timothy Powell, for instance, recounts how efforts to build bridges between the American Philosophical Society (APS) and representatives from Indigenous communities initially hit a snag when an APS representative, in his welcoming remarks,

unwittingly presented a document that proved insulting to the guests assembled. While the incident was by no means irreparable, it highlighted just how little the APS staff actually understood about the Indigenous artifacts in their collection. Powell observes that by bringing the original stewards of these holdings into the archive it was quickly and “powerfully” demonstrated how the “knowledge kept in the library and the traditional knowledge kept by the communities . . . can come to life when reconnected” (31). Powell and members of the APS had to undergo a seismic shift in their thinking of themselves as the “experts” in charge of their own collections—a ceding of institutional control and authority that few are willing to attempt.

Historian Jennifer O’Neal, a member of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, acknowledges how these concerns strike directly at the “inherent historic problem within archival repositories that have served as sites of power over Indigenous history, culture and lifeways” (48). Too often, interpretation of collected materials are concretized by the anthropologists or ethnographers who, rightfully or not, first appropriated them (48). In laying out a set of protocols for how to respectfully deal with existing collections, O’Neal concludes that professional archivists must take the lead in decolonizing their possessions through “collaboration, stewardship, respectful relationships, reciprocity, and finally reconciliation” (51).

Afterlives, however, is not merely a series of prescriptions and warnings. Nearly every essay engages with exciting archival materials that either have been historically overlooked or are being placed under a compelling interpretive lens. Powell’s essay, for instance, opens up new connections in regard to the Irving A. Hallowell collection of Ojibwe pictographic maps and scrolls recorded on birch bark, an Indigenous archive that thoroughly disrupts assumptions of North America as a “prehistorical” space prior to contact. Susan Patterson Glover offers insight into the origins of what is known as the Cree syllabic system, ostensibly devised by the nineteenth-century Methodist minister James Evans, but with origins in the Cree practice of using trail signs and pictographs considered “to be a gift to the Cree people from the spirit world” (159). Marie Balsley Taylor’s essay thinks through the importance of indigenous kinship systems in properly understanding the role of Wequash, a seventeenth-century Pequot whose story was placed in the service of competing Puritan propaganda campaigns, to the extent that, even today, it is difficult to untangle him from the rhetorical objectives of his European chroniclers. And Kelly Wisecup, in her essay, disentangles a list of Indigenous words and their translations, compiled by the Cherokee removal-era activist John Ridge, from the papers of Albert Gallatin, a US statesman of the same period. Wisecup’s essay is demonstrative of the manner in which Indigenous artifacts become absorbed and decontextualized within the dominant archive. While Gallatin’s papers are thoroughly numbered, cataloged,

and indexed, having served as a vital mechanism for disenfranchising Native peoples from their lands, Ridge's word lists remain unsearchable, invisible within the "voluminous" collection unless, as Wisecup claims, "one knows where to look" (121). What is nearly lost in this absorption is the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty implied in the offering Ridge sent to Gallatin, and how southern Indigenous language practice operated in relation to social structures, kinship networks, and a profound connection to the land being stripped out from under them.

Finally, Christine DeLucia raises questions about the possible dangers of abstracting archival materials from their historical locations through the process of digitization. While visiting the Bacon Free Library in Natick, Massachusetts, site of the first of the so-called "Indian praying towns" in Puritan New England, DeLucia ponders whether or not digitization should be considered an asset. She acknowledges that "a web-based resource encompassing digital surrogates of the historical society's holdings" would facilitate scholarship on many levels. DeLucia worries, however, about the repercussions of researchers acquiring immediate access "without having to subject themselves to the unease or even trauma of entering into a fraught space" or how the "complex past of settler-colonial disturbances ought to inflect the discussion" (83). Is there a danger of abstracting ourselves from historical violence when we open up such distances between our physical selves and the site of the trauma?

These are questions that, for most archivists, rarely come into play. They are questions, however, that continue to trouble investigations into the Indigenous archives, which, after all, have spectral afterlives, resonances and traces that bear the tragic wisdom of enduring four hundred years of settler colonial violence and yet continue to "resist annihilation." This pertains to the Occom Circle Project as well, for while it is a superbly conceived and executed resource, one of the better digital archives that I have encountered, it remains housed in the halls of Dartmouth, whose official seal still depicts two naked Indians being pulled, as though by tractor beam, toward the shimmering vision of a giant Christian Bible hovering like the sun over the venerable institution. For those who know Occom's history and the history of the New England tribes, Dartmouth too is a "fraught space." This collection opens up a poignant conversation about how scholars, entering into both traditional and digital archives, will have to engage with such spaces and arrive at respectful solutions for dealing with the spectral afterlives of Indigenous archives.

Drew Lopenzina
Old Dominion University