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Storied Methodologies: Finding Hope in the Archives

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Abstract: Engaging Indigenous archival methodologies, this essay seeks opportunities for settler scholars to learn from layered and inclusive storytelling methods and to reconsider the value of storywork traditions that reflect listening spaces and models of resistance. We find hope and new possibilities for an expanded view of rhetoric in this approach, one grounded in responsible and ethical approaches for learning from and incorporating community research practices into our work—while neither appropriating nor assuming knowledge we do not yet possess.

Keywords: Indigenous Methodologies, storywork, invitational rhetoric, unsettling archival research, oral histories

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Hope sparkles like water in the clean carafe.

—Adrienne Rich, "Letters: March 1969"

Choctaw scholar, novelist, screenwriter, playwright, and humorist LeAnne Howe explains the significance of the storytelling theory she terms *tribalography*, the "Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another" (qtd in Squint xi). In a 2012 interview, she explains how tribalography is tied to "the fact that Natives always, always, always are always adding to their story" and including "white people, Black people, other red people, yellow, brown, we are constantly adding to our story" (Caison 67). Highlighting this inclusion of everyone, this resistance to "exclude or cut people off," even when Indigenous people are absent in non-Native authored works (Caison 68), Howe reveals a space for hopefulness in studying transformative Indigenous archival methods and storytelling methodologies. In this essay, we explore ways in which we can all learn from these layered and inclusive storytelling methods that rely upon archival materials and sources to upend traditional colonial and settler ways of creating narratives. Acknowledging the significance and influence of tribalology methods, Howe expresses her delight in the reception of these ideas, her pleasure in being

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"helpful to people trying to understand the way that Native people tell stories, and *what we want*…reciprocity" (qtd in Squint xii). We contend that including Indigenous storytelling practices as a focal point in archival research methods attempts to address both reciprocity and hopefulness.

Listening Spaces

> If we want archive stories to unsettle rather than settle archival research, we need a better sense of what stories are, what they do, and how we might best deploy them in innovative and incisive ways.
>
> --Jean Bessette, "Unsettling the Archive Story"

Malea Powell, in "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians *Use* Writing," proclaims that stories "have the power to make, re-make, un-make, the world" (396). Powell's article arrived at a moment when work on Indigenous studies in Rhetoric and Composition was scant and "suffer[ed] from the burdens of a colonial mindset and a general lack of understanding about the diversity of American Indian cultures and histories" (397). She traces these misunderstandings back to origin stories of the Western rhetorical tradition, which classically resist the notion that "some of us read and listen from a different space" (397). Her stance echoes practices of other disciplines that were already challenging the colonial mindset, recognizing "different spaces" of listening as locations of research. For example, Indigenous scholars including Linda Tuwihai Smith, Jo-Ann Archibald, and Jelena Porsanger were already working to decolonize scholarship, identifying Western research methods as inherently colonial and "aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts" through problematization (Porsanger 106). Porsanger notes that this approach assumes that "in relation to Indigenous peoples, their entire existence seems to be a problem or a question for researchers, often formulated as "The ... (insert name of Indigenous group) problem" or "The ... (insert name of Indigenous group) question" (Porsanger, quoting Smith (90), 106). Ernest Stromberg further explains, "In the aftermath of white military conquests and subjugation, [Indigenous people] who would speak or write on behalf of Native rights and cultures were and often still are addressing an audience that generally assumes its own superiority. It is not a rhetorical situation conducive to mutual dialogue" (5). Indigenous research methodologies resist this framing, instead centering human experience and alternate forms of meaning-making to avoid linear thinking and to make room for deliberation and recursive thought. The lessons of this resistance have broader applications, particularly for constructing knowledge by viewing archives as locations that innately center human experience.

Models of Resistance

> Hope can be what sustains life in the face of despair, and yet it is not simply the desire for things to come, or the betterment of life. It is the drive or energy that embeds us in the world – in the ecology of life, ethics and politics.
>
> --Mary Zournazi, *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*

Feminist scholars (in particular) were early adopters of storytelling methodologies (what Archibald terms "storywork") as part of an organic heuristic that prioritizes discourse and broader material culture as evidence (see Haraway, Hartman, Nooiger and Sol Cueva, and Royster and Kirsch). They seek "to develop mechanisms by which listening deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly become standard practice not only in feminist rhetorical scholarship but also in rhetorical studies writ large," particularly when working with archives (Royster and Kirsch 20). For instance, in thinking about how we teach archival research, historical scholar Michael-John DePalma identifies an ethical relationship between the topics and subjects that scholars choose to explore and their accompanying research methods. Considering archives as a space for "ethical in(ter)vention" that privileges communities, DePalma observes that "the movement toward more expansive understandings of archives and communities [is] well underway, and the need to approach them as dynamic and culturally situated is fundamental to our dispositions as scholars of rhetoric and composition" (212). He contends that by acknowledging all materials in a particular collection as community "texts" and privileging those communities within the work, we foster ethical research practices, both for ourselves and the next generation of researchers.

These broadened perspectives of methodology offer hope and suggest new possibilities for an expanded view of rhetoric, one that leads to diverse paths of inquiry and prompts researchers to reconsider the collaborative role of storytelling creation and circulation as methodological practice. In this vein, Stromberg lamented the lack of an Indigenous "book-length project" in 2006, explaining that as "the scope of rhetorical studies expands, any attempt to comprehend the rhetorical traditions of the United States that neglects the practices of American Indians remains significantly incomplete" (6).

An Invitational Model

Works like Emily Legg's brilliant 2023 *Stories of Our Living Ephemera*: *Storytelling Methodologies in the Archives of the Cherokee National Seminaries, 1846-1907* address this breach. In particular, the chapters articulating Indigenous methodologies, reflective archival research practices, and pedagogical storytelling invite study and recognition. Stromberg describes his collection *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance* as an "invitation and an introduction to [Indigenous] traditions" (8). The concept of *invitation* is important, indicating a notion of hospitality that at once is welcoming yet implies mutual respect.[1]Legg succinctly explores this relationship in discussing the inherent tension between honoring community practices and contributions while not appropriating those intellectual ideas and history:

> "I've encountered the phrase, 'Well, that's interesting, but that's your thing.' or, 'Oh, I'm not doing anything on Indigenous rhetorics, so I didn't cite any Indigenous people–I don't want to appropriate

1 LeAnne Howe and Padraig Kirwan's edited collection *Famine Pots: The Choctaw-Irish Gift Exchange*, 1847-Present (Michigan State UP 2020) illustrates a longitudinal, cross-community appreciation of community membership and an integration of material culture research practices. For a discussion of ways in which invitation and hospitality ethically play out in this ongoing relationship, see Lynée Lewis Gaillet's "Circumventing 'Hospitality": The Enduring Legacy of 19th-Century Choctaw Nation and Irish Solidarity." The CEA Critic, vol. 85, no. 3, 2023, pp. 217-232

> that work.' And yet, when I read current scholarship, especially related to storytelling, object-oriented ontologies, 'new' materialism, I am struck by the similarities to my own research on Indigenous ontologies with the news publications making the materialist turns as well as theories that marvel at the role of stories, and yet, the bibliographies read as a modern erasure of Indigenous voices." (235)

In addressing issues regarding appropriations of cultural rhetorics or pedagogical knowledge-making, Indigenous scholar Andrea Riley Mukavetz reinforces that we don't "have to be native, work with native people, or tell stories the way [she tells] stories to find these practices useful and meaningful" (121-22). Yet, bridging respect and learning about community practices while repelling outright appropriation and "academic aggression" are legitimate concerns (Legg 237). Feminist and Indigenous scholars committed to unsettling archival research practices help us to identify ethical hybrid methodologies. Legg's monograph overlays scholarship with traditions and community ideologies to reimagine material culture, suggesting that "we (Indigenous and settler scholars alike) can reflect on our own pathways in ceremony and work to Indigenize our teaching, our writing methods, and storied ways" (24). Her exploration of ways to encourage cross-generational listening and learning (including collaborating with the dead) outlines an Indigenous methodology featuring storywork that views archives as a well-source of knowledge, one that transcends time and space. She explains that if we make our stance clear, focus on situated storytelling that privileges the experiences of stakeholders, and interrogate the "boundaries we place between our research practices and our ways of being and knowing in the world," then we can bridge research methods/positionality in ways that "[sustain] a community of knowledge-makers across time" (Legg 24). Archival researchers committed to unsettling existing holdings and expanding layered and nuanced historical narratives recognize in Legg's detailed and communal methodology a generative and novel approach that at once feels feminist and hopeful given the possibilities for transforming and broadening the aims and goals of primary investigation.

Reimagining Praxis

Considering nuanced concepts of position/ality, Legg's cautionary, yet sanguine, tales of archival research methods avoid linear storytelling, move beyond narrow Enlightenment archival practices, and listen for interwoven narratives. Contributors to *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives* and other recent scholarship committed to decolonializing archives likewise convincingly illustrate the need to disrupt traditional narratives through augmented storytelling practices that reconsider perspective, approaches, participants, and evidence; however, intersectional, detailed methods for doing this work aren't readily available. Legg's "networked knowledge-making praxis," stemming from an Indigenous mapping framework, organically decolonizes archives by re-landscaping the discipline to make room for multiple voices (past and present) to collaborate (21). Hope, however, is not found in a specific reimagination of method or praxis; instead, hope resides in *the act* of reimagination.

Outlines of this reimagination of praxis appear in activist-archivists' calls for keepers to unsettle

and reconsider how materials are collected, archived, and preserved (see Caswell and Cifor; Puzalon and Caswell; Jagger; Christen; Jimerson; Quinn; Duff et al.), though they are most evident in the works of Indigenous scholars like Legg, Smith, Archibald, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Andrea Mukavetz. Legg notes that "[as with] stories, the path to knowledge and theoretical uptakes (in an academic sense) meander through important shifts in the ways we do things and a (re)positioning in our relationships to story and knowledge-making to strip away the deeply embedded tendencies of Eurocentric meaning-making" (17). The lessons that she and other activist/Indigenous scholars impart stress that although we may be trained through Western academic research traditions, that education does not preclude a recognition or acceptance of other traditions—including alternate ways of sensing (seeing, listening, embodying). The broad hope that scholars (especially non-native researchers) can take from nuanced and communal Indigenous methodologies resides in the inherent possibilities for reimagining approaches to archival research, not in the adoption of a particular framework for scholarly inquiry.

Thus, Legg's methodological discussions represent a point of unsettling that considers how we might re-envision academic inquiry, reconsider what counts as evidence, and (re)position work in the archives to acknowledge complex realities, communities, and varied ways of knowledge-building. This approach respectfully makes room for alternate purposes, inclusion of multiple narratives, broadening the well of available knowledge, and constructing an awareness that cannot be reached otherwise. As Cheryl Glenn explains, even "feminist rhetoricians need to rethink our own research agendas and scholarly stance as we widen our understanding of who and what can be defined as rhetorical and as we appreciate more fully the vast range of methods, methodologies, and epistemologies currently in circulation" (210).

Engagement

> The moment of hope is when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future.
>
> —Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

Legg identifies a convergence of the *not yet* and the *future*, building upon Powell's *different space* and providing inspiration for settler researchers to answer Glenn's call for expanded feminist and archival research goals and projects. Highlighting differences between (Western) research paths that result in knowledge production and (Indigenous) research paths that enhance ways of knowing, Smith explains that Indigenous research methods center community concepts and worldviews to empower members to "know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (39). However, while reminding us that "research practices, methods, and theories are culturally located and specific," Mukavetz explains that "[w]hat relationality and there-ness, as intercultural research practices, can offer researchers is a way into making cross-cultural (research) relationships visible" (121-22). For community outsiders, considering how engagement with Indigenous research practices might occur in non-appropriative and respectful ways becomes imperative.

Responsible approaches for incorporating research practices as an outsider or investigating members of a community to which the researcher doesn't belong stem from interrogating researcher positionality, along with adopted method/ologies. In explaining their concept of "critical imagination," Royster and Kirsch provide guiding questions to promote ethical and respectful engagement when researching "those whose voices have rarely been heard or studied by rhetoricians" (20). They ask:

> [H]ow do we render their work and lives meaningfully? How do we honor their traditions? How do we transport ourselves back to the time and context in which they lived, knowing full well that is not possible to see things from their vantage point? How did they frame (rather than we frame) the questions by which they navigated their own lives? What more lingers in what we know about them that would suggest that we need to think again, to think more deeply, to think more broadly? How do we make what was going on in their context relevant or illuminating for the contemporary context?" (20)

Similarly, when researching archives, Smith suggests a set of questions that serve as a heuristic for interrogating power and recentering subjects and communities in new projects. These questions correlate with Indigenous research guidelines:

> Whose research is this?
>
> Who owns it?
>
> Whose interests does it serve?
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> Who will benefit from it?
>
> Who has designed its questions and framed its scope?
>
> Who will carry it out?
>
> Who will write it up?
>
> How will the results be disseminated?
>
> (Smith quoted in Porsanger, 113)

Using Smith's questions as a benchmark, we might also examine the archives, themselves, to query holdings and examine relationships that might be cultivated among researchers, subjects, and the materials, asking overlapping but also additional correlated questions:

Where are they collected?

How did the materials come to be placed in the archive?

Whose stories are told?

Whose interests do they serve?

What communities are featured in the materials?

These questions interrogate community origins and invite collaborations, grounding investigations in identity and origin stories. Writing the backstory of a collection and its associated community provides critical research avenues, ones tied to narratives, oral histories, and material artifacts that support storytelling and preservation efforts.

The Hope

"The possibilities of struggling together toward something more beautiful, more human, fill me with hope.

—Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetorical Feminism*

Western conceptions of storytelling relegate the practice to creative spaces that reinforce cultural truisms, reiterate tropes, and detail apocrypha rather than using narrative as a way to identify patterns and share knowledge. However, archives often require Royster and Kirsch's concept of "critical imagination" to stitch together what has been lost or never offered for keeping. Hybrid methodologies incorporating storytelling provide researchers a bridge for preserving and connecting community histories to the present, making sense of inconsistencies and static that have accrued over time.

Indigenous methods innately understand the value of storytelling as storywork, not just providing "color" but serving as a crucial element in constructing knowledge. These methods intersect with feminist and archival scholars' theories and practices for unsettling and expanding knowledge-making, particularly when considering hope simultaneously as a methodology, an action and an intellectual framework for cultivating change that is essentially "more respectful, sympathetic, ethical and useful," aspects that define all responsible research (Smith 9). And herein lies the hope—that in reconsidering the potential of the archives, we might resist prevailing myths and, instead, listen to community members' stories to guide our way.

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