Unlearning the Archive: Delinking, Positionality, and Hope

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Abstract: Researcher positionality drives research design, information sourcing, methodology selection, and experience in the archive. This personal reflection offers a limited case study in privileging positionality alongside decolonizing methods such as delinking and détournement to engender transformation and hope in archival research. Positionality, deception analysis, and decolonizing methodologies elucidate power imbalances surrounding Indian Removal rhetorics and their (re)presentations in federal archives. Drawing from archival research at the Library of Congress, this case study argues for positionality-driven research approaches and the incorporation of alternative archival sources. This study highlights ways researchers can navigate archival limitations, interrogate dominant narratives, and expand methodological approaches.

Keywords: positionality, decolonizing, colonial rhetoric, deception, archives, Indian Removal Act of 1830

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> "Positionality of the researcher can inflect the contours of the project: how it both opens and narrows the boundaries." Jean Bessette

Bringing an attunement to one's subjectivities, biases, identities, preferences, and perspectives and their effects on these openings and narrowings can be personally enlightening as well as pedagogically and methodologically advancing. Positionality drives our research approach and informs how we experience archives and artifacts. Understanding predispositions can impart greater objectivity into the research process by enabling us to enact countermeasures within the research design to root out subjectivities. Significantly, positionality and positionality statements can illuminate opportunities for critical engagement and methods for unlearning and relearning to find new paths in the archives. Researcher's positionality statements highlight the importance of diversity in research while enhancing the credibility and relevance of their work by offering consumers a more holistic contextual understanding of their choice in sources, methods, style, and worldviews. Furthermore, positionality statements enhance consumers' discernment of fact patterns, analysis, and storytelling, enabling researchers to engage more effectively with published works or extend the research's findings.

To illustrate the role of positionality in opening and narrowing boundaries, I offer a brief personal reflection as a limited case study for privileging positionality as a tool that can ultimately elucidate hope

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in the archives. I additionally portray how decolonizing methods such as delinking and détournement can effectively accompany positionality to offer maximal transformative potential. Contemplating how my positionality both opened and narrowed boundaries in recent archival research on the Indian Removal Act of 1830 at the Library of Congress (LOC), I invariably think of Qwo-Li Driskill and Malea Powell's powerful positional acknowledgments in "Dreaming Charles Eastman: Cultural Memory, Autobiography, and Geography in Indigenous Rhetorical Histories." Referencing Driskill's statement, "The archival project was not created *for* Indians. It was created to consolidate knowledge *about* Indians. And yet, here I am, an Indian in the archive," Powell offered, "And yet, here *I* am, an Indian talking about what it means to be an Indian in the archive, what it means to be the object looking back, the objectified engaged in the process of making knowledge about the processes that led to my objectification" (117). Partly sharing Driskill and Powell's positionality of being American Indian in the archive, I, too, witnessed the perpetuated disparities and objectification.

As a cisgender woman of Northern European and American Indian ancestry and member of the Sault Ste Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, I inherently gravitated toward researching the Removal policies and treaties that displaced tens- to hundreds of thousands of American Indians from their homelands east of the Mississippi. My professional background shaped how I approached this research by leading me to trust that the Library of Congress would offer a comprehensive and authoritative view on Removal. After all, the Library of Congress "is an unparalleled world resource. The collection includes millions [of] cataloged books and other print materials in 470 languages; millions of manuscripts; the largest rare book collection in North America; and the world's largest collection of legal materials, films, maps, sheet music and sound recordings" ("General Information"). However, despite the collection's robustness, I encountered vulgar silence in representations of tribal and Indigenous voices. Disappointingly, the LOC Research Guide on the Indian Removal Act (re)presented the rhetoric of the colonizer at the resounding exclusion of the colonized, systematically displaying congressional publications, Andrew Jackson papers, historic newspapers highlighting state and federal government articles, maps of land cessations, and Martin Van Buren papers, and just one direct reference to a Cherokee newspaper article on Removal (Library of Congress, Cherokee). The resulting disproportionate inaccessibility to Indigenous narratives and (re)presentations is the byproduct of centuries of rhetorical layering propagating colonizer narratives and norms.

I witnessed how the vulgar silence of Indigenous voices threatens to erase public memory of the exploitation and ill-treatment, not only of my ancestors but also of countless others. Confronted with this painful realization, I sought out methods to understand the biases and agendas that led to this predicament. Pondering the state and function of the archive, I found myself calling upon the decolonizing method of delinking, unlearning my instinctual ways of being and seeing to open my eyes to new ways of learning and relearning. Delinking calls for critical disengagement from colonial epistemologies in order to reconfigure knowledge production toward a decolonial pluralism wherein many worlds coexist (Mignolo 463). Delinking, as championed by Mignolo, has been theoretically and methodologically explored by scholars including Wanzer, Cushman, Baca, and Garcia, among others. Cushman et al. expand delinking by advocat-

ing a pluriversal approach that incorporates Kirsch and Royster's creative imagination and considers cultural logics and their role in enabling rhetoric, epistemic shifts, and the possibility of decoloniality (Cushman et al. 15-16). Seeking to engage this pluriversal delinking approach in practice, I critically interrogated the LOC's dominant narrative and sought alternate spaces that foregrounded American Indian voices. I questioned the curation of sources by examining absences and presences. I analyzed land cessation maps and treaty documents for their content and how they obscured or erased Indigenous agency. I additionally explored alternative resources like the Seminole Tribe of Florida's Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum to center Indigenous perspectives and challenge the overwhelmingly disproportionate colonizer records within federal collections.

Seeking to reveal power imbalances in the archive and archival material, I employed the tool of active disentanglement against prevalent colonizer narratives. This disentanglement practice, in concert with my academic positionality as a deception researcher, drove me to recognize underlying deceptive messaging within Andrew Jackson's and the federal government's rhetoric. Specifically, Jackson's benevolent narrative framing of Removal stood out for its deceptive concealment of the government's forceful actions. Jackson's use of euphemistic language signaled coercion behind a guise of benevolence that Kenneth Burke would describe as "terministic screens," wherein language choices direct attention and shape perceptions (Burke 45). Jackson's deceptive terminology was especially evident in his annual addresses to Congress. His repeated emphasis on voluntariness sought to manipulate public perception, garner support, and circumvent opposition while enabling him to maintain a pretense of morality. Jackson's benevolent rhetoric effectively served as a smokescreen to camouflage the government's power imbalances and egregious actions by foregrounding the federal government's legitimacy narratives while obscuring the oppressive realities of its actions. This deceptive juxtaposition aligns with Barton Whaley's concept of "hiding the real while showing the false" (Whaley 27). Recognition of this perceptible deceptive tactic enabled me to critically interrogate the archival material and its embedded power structures more deeply.

My interaction in the archive further impelled me to explore how reflexivity and reframing may elucidate hope. Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines *reflexivity* as taking greater control over discussions and handling Indigenous issues and social problems (175). "Reframing occurs in other contexts where Indigenous people resist being boxed and labeled according to categories which do not fit" (Smith 175). Critical examinations through reflexivity and reframing can facilitate opportunities for halting discriminatory characterizations while unlocking divergent considerations for learning, being, and knowing.

Seeking to reframe my approach while acknowledging logistical and historical challenges with obtaining documentation of Indigenous voices regarding Removal policies, I expanded my scope of information sources to include local and state government, tribal, and university historical centers and museums. Despite my intention to employ reflexivity by foregrounding Indigenous discourse, I generally encountered the same disproportionate inaccessibility to Indigenous artifacts and narratives across local and state government and university historical centers and museums as I had with the LOC. However, I notably found that the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum held primary and secondary sources of artifacts from the time of Removal,

including newspaper clippings and government correspondence. These sources provided insight into Indigenous communities' realities, representing a counterpoint to the federal government's carefully constructed Removal narrative as orderly and benevolent.

Equipped with this broader set of artifacts, I explored how to leverage methods such as détournement to identify, extract, and exploit elements from underlying power structures to engender new perspectives. Jason Black, paraphrasing Guy Debord, defines détournement as a repurposing of "the rhetoric of those in power to drain the original language of its oppressive assaults in the service of propping up the disempowered" (Debord qtd. in Black 12). Détournement efforts first sought to expose injustices and question claims of morality and ethics by contrasting colonial narratives with Indigenous accounts and critically interrogating the government's rhetorical strategies. The second step in my détournement effort was to critically imagine ways to exploit and effectively repackage the government's oppressive terms and themes into empowering language and ideas for Indigenous populations. Researchers can employ détournement to reveal and counter oppressive rhetoric in the archive and artifacts.

The fluid nature of challenges with (re)presentation mandates flexibility in solution-making and implores a combination of methodologies to explore alternative pathways to prioritize collaboration, understanding, and opportunities for hope. My research drew inspiration from the archival approaches of Hagan, O'Neal, Luker, Punzalan, and Marsh, as well as from the postcolonial and decolonizing frameworks of Bastian, Stoler, Cushman, Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, and Garcia. I sought to build on their work by employing numerous decolonizing tools and open-ended fact-finding, patterning, and storying to generate holistic findings and explore alternative pathways.

By examining my positionality, I realized its power to inform the development and employment of research designs, methodologies, pedagogical modalities, and analysis. Harnessing my positionality, I used decolonizing methodologies to interrogate, unlearn, and relearn the archives and artifacts I encountered. These decolonizing methods critically evaluated dominant and normative ways of seeing, being, and knowing to uncover new possibilities for interpretation while illuminating opportunities for hope as a researcher. This increased awareness and empathy fostered intellectual growth and ultimately delivered an actionable methodological transformation practice that continuously yields opportunities for modification, application, and hope.

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