




Reckoning with the Legacy of Land-Grant University Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections as Ventures of Pioneer Veneration

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Article abstract

Land-grant colleges and universities in the United States, and by extension their libraries and archives, seek to uphold a three-part mission of teaching, research, and service, while also focusing on equality of access, regardless of class. The admirability of that mission, however, is tempered by “genesis amnesia,” where, as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron say, “societies cover up or erase the origins of policies or institutions in order to obfuscate the social constructions that underlie them.” Other former settler colonies, such as Canada, maintain similarly structured and afflicted colleges and universities. For many institutions, the terms “land-grant,” or in Canadian contexts “land-endowed” or “land-financed,” act as a veneer, covering up and at times venerating an extractive and traumatic process by which Indigenous peoples were dispossessed of their lands. In this reflective case study, we define pioneer veneration as a symptom of colonialism and describe recent efforts to challenge it within our own library and archives. Using two collections containing Indigenous knowledges but not (primarily) Indigenous belongings, we explore our attempts to challenge pioneer veneration and seek out more impactful and purposefully reparative avenues of service to Indigenous patrons and stakeholders. By specifically defining the term pioneer veneration and discussing our institution’s effort to counter it in two specific collections, we hope to expand the lens of the types of collections that can be part of decolonization work and offer some replicable examples of work that redresses white supremacy and colonialism in institutional archives.





Reckoning with the Legacy of Land-Grant University Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections as Ventures of *Pioneer Veneration*

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ABSTRACT

Land-grant colleges and universities in the United States, and by extension their libraries and archives, seek to uphold a three-part mission of teaching, research, and service, while also focusing on equality of access, regardless of class. The admirability of that mission, however, is tempered by “genesis amnesia,” where, as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron say, “societies cover up or erase the origins of policies or institutions in order to obfuscate the social constructions that underlie them.” Other former settler colonies, such as Canada, maintain similarly structured and afflicted colleges and universities. For many institutions, the terms “land-grant,” or in Canadian contexts “land-endowed” or “land-financed,” act as a veneer, covering up and at times venerating an extractive and traumatic process by which Indigenous peoples were dispossessed of their lands. In this reflective case study, we define pioneer veneration as a symptom of colonialism and describe recent efforts to challenge it within our own library and archives. Using two collections containing Indigenous knowledges but not (primarily) Indigenous belongings, we explore our attempts to challenge pioneer veneration and seek out more impactful and purposefully reparative avenues of service to Indigenous patrons and stakeholders. By specifically defining the term pioneer veneration and discussing our institution’s effort to counter it in two specific collections, we hope to expand the lens of the types of collections that can be part of decolonization work and offer some replicable examples of work that redresses white supremacy and colonialism in institutional archives.



Keywords: *decolonization · land-grant colleges and universities · libraries and archives · pioneer veneration*

RÉSUMÉ

Les collèges et universités fonciers aux États-Unis, et par extension leurs bibliothèques et archives, cherchent à remplir une mission en trois volets d'enseignement, de recherche et de service, tout en se concentrant également sur l'égalité d'accès, quelle que soit la classe. L'admirabilité de cette mission, cependant, est tempérée par « l'amnésie de la genèse », où, comme le disent Pierre Bourdieu et Jean-Claude Passeron, « les sociétés dissimulent ou effacent les origines des politiques ou des institutions afin d'obscurcir les constructions sociales qui les sous-tendent. » D'autres anciennes colonies de peuplement, tel le Canada, maintiennent des collèges et des universités similairement structurés et affligés. Pour de nombreuses institutions, les termes « concession de terres », ou dans les contextes canadiens « terrains en dotation » ou « financé par des terres », agissent comme un vernis, dissimulant et parfois vénérant un processus extractif et traumatisant par lequel les peuples autochtones ont été dépossédés de leurs terres. Dans cette étude de cas réflexive, nous définissons vénération des pionniers comme un symptôme du colonialisme et décrivons les efforts récents pour le contester au sein de notre propre bibliothèque et archives. À l'aide de deux collections contenant des savoirs autochtones mais pas (principalement) des biens autochtones, nous explorons nos tentatives de remettre en question la vénération des pionniers et cherchons des avenues de service plus percutantes et délibérément réparatrices pour les usagers et usagères et les parties prenantes autochtones. En définissant spécifiquement le terme vénération des pionniers et en discutant des efforts de notre institution pour y remédier dans deux collections spécifiques, nous espérons élargir l'objectif des types de collections qui peuvent faire partie du travail de décolonisation et offrir des exemples reproductibles d'actions qui remédient la suprématie blanche et le colonialisme dans les archives institutionnelles.

Mots-clés : *bibliothèques et archives · collèges et universités concédants de terres · décolonisation · vénération des pionniers*

THIS article critiques the ways in which many libraries, archives, and special collections at public colleges and universities in both the United States and Canada simultaneously situate themselves as serving *all* their citizens while implicitly embracing and propagating what we term “pioneer veneration.” *Pioneer veneration* is a term we are introducing to library and archival studies to refer to the subtextual and sometimes overt position that uncritically celebrates Western expansion and colonization, thus perpetuating white supremacy and the continued erasure of marginalized peoples and histories. In practice, *pioneer veneration* manifests in settler histories being carefully preserved and uncritically reproduced in institutional collections, in the stories told by and about colonization, and in the voices and perspectives excluded or only included for extractive aims. The authors find that *pioneer veneration* is embedded in the culture of land-financed colleges and universities (LFCUs). Our focus is on higher education institutions that received distributions of

land from national or state authorities. This land, which states or nations acquired through their coercive actions as colonial powers, was distributed with the expressed purpose of financing schools for the “public good.” In the United States, this process is epitomized by the land-grant colleges and universities founded through the Morrill Act, but it is also a funding scheme that built higher education institutions in many settler colonies, including Canada. Although this case study is focused on a land-grant university in the United States, our theory of *pioneer veneration* and our experiences at the University of Idaho have analogies to experiences in other settler colonies, especially Canada.

Too many land-financed libraries, archives, and special collections have serious and severe issues related to the possession of collections that contain stolen ancestors in the form of human remains, as well as collections of artifacts and belongings of dubious provenance. Yet even library and archive workers at LFCUs who manage less overtly problematic collections cannot breathe a premature sigh of relief. Indigenous peoples’ histories, viewpoints, and cultures are marginalized in many ways throughout university archives and collections, even in those collections not specifically containing the belongings of Native American, First Nations, and other Indigenous peoples. The absence of collections meeting legal standards for repatriation, moreover, is no longer an acceptable threshold for successfully decolonizing an archive. Instead, we understand decolonization as work that is iterative and ongoing. It is in that spirit that the authors introduce *pioneer veneration* as an engrained practice in colonial spaces that must be identified, interrogated, and remediated.

At the University of Idaho, recent work has sought to redress the historic silencing or minimization of Indigenous perspectives in collections that are derived from the knowledge and history of their communities but are not of their own making. This paper will explore how recent work with an archival collection of photos and with the Donald E. Crabtree Lithic Technology Collection—collections that primarily contain items created by non-Indigenous people but which are informed and inspired by their contexts—presents an opportunity for a decolonization praxis that centers Indigenous perspectives and sovereignty over continued, uncritical *pioneer veneration*.

The Colonial Legacy of Land-Financed Colleges and Universities

In late March 2020, *High Country News* (HCN) released an exposé by Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone (2020) that sent shock waves through academic circles. “Land-Grab Universities” was a detailed, remarkably researched assessment of the system that created some of America’s largest universities. For many in the academic community this piece provoked new thinking and awareness about the problematic origins of

higher education institutions generally (Harvey 2022; Mt. Pleasant and Kantrowitz 2021) and America's land-grant university system specifically. The article successfully argued that a system treated as an unquestionable public good for so long required more critical reflection and, importantly, necessitated reparative actions on the part of benefiting institutions.

In this article, *HCN* reporters Lee and Ahtone effectively called readers' attention to the fact that "the Morrill Act worked by turning land expropriated from tribal nations into seed money for higher education." This practice served as a powerful mechanism for turning often unceded tribal lands into an institutional system that aided the settlement or colonization of lands, and the creation of an imperial, decidedly non-Indigenous, intellectual empire. America's land-grant colleges and universities are so named because they were established or significantly supported by federal appropriations of supposedly unused lands. The Morrill Act of 1862 authorized the distribution of many millions of acres of federally owned land to institutions of higher education, intending for those tracts to be sold for immediate revenue or to be managed as an ongoing source of income for the schools. As Caitlin Harvey (2022) noted about settler colonies broadly:

Financing universities through land made these institutions no small piece of the process of Indigenous dispossession. In addition, new public universities later institutionalized branches of knowledge like agricultural science ... [which] diverged from Indigenous ways of being and thinking about land, while simultaneously entrenching settlers' relationship to the land.

For those working in American institutions that continue to benefit from the Morrill Act, the land-grant university moniker is a seemingly inescapable element of mission statements, goal setting, and marketing communications. Land-grant status is touted as a virtue, and not without some reason. The foundational legislation explicitly called for recipient institutions to use granted lands "to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (National Archives 2022, Section 4 of the Morrill Act). The schools did make higher education affordable and attainable for rural and working class Americans, with the obvious caveat that the definition of who counted as a citizen has evolved over time—people of color and Indigenous people were initially excluded at some institutions.¹ From their inception, land-grant universities were imagined as democratizing forces and economically generative institutions (see Sorber 2018;

1. Racial segregation limited which Americans could access this education in many parts of the country. In the decades following the Civil War, a second Morrill Act in 1890 expanded the goals of land-grant institutions to include reintegrating southern states. Seventeen historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were formed under the expanded legislation (Staley 2012).

Staley 2012), while also serving an important and ultimately extractive purpose in the name of nation building and settlement. Those themes still resonate with administrators, alumni, and donors of these institutions. In 2024, for example, the University of Idaho continues to define its mission in terms of its status as a land-grant university.²

The Land-Financed Model on a Global Scale

Although land-grant colleges and universities, as established by the Morrill Act, are a uniquely American subset of institutions, many colleges and universities globally have also benefited from Indigenous dispossession (Harvey 2021, 2022, 2023; Stein 2022). For example, “nearly all nineteenth-century universities established in Aotearoa New Zealand ... received grants of Māori land,” including the University of Canterbury and the University of Otago (Harvey 2023, 488). Similar trends are evident in Australian and South African universities, which also received grants of unceded land (Harvey 2021, 2022, 2023).

Recently, research and investigations into the University of Toronto, University of Manitoba, and University of British Columbia have illuminated how these universities were granted Indigenous lands via endowments (Harvey 2023, 493; Stein 2022, 19–20). In some instances, these lands were used as locations of colleges, universities, and associated buildings, while in others, these lands were leased or sold to build financial capital and develop campuses elsewhere (Harvey 2023; Stein 2022). According to Harvey (2023, 468), “land was the essential ingredient in university building in both Ontario and Manitoba,” with the establishment of these universities and their continued wealth directly tied to Indigenous dispossession. In both the United States and Canada, the violent and dispossessive history that led to the founding of these colleges and universities often collides with their own stated aims to more fully recognize local Native American, First Nations, and other Indigenous peoples. One of the most visible ways colleges and universities attempt to do this is by sharing land acknowledgment statements on their websites and at official events. These acknowledgments, unfortunately, can become performative and uncritical. By functioning as static statements that uphold settler futurity by “relegat[ing] Indigenous peoples to a mythic past” (Sobo et al. 2021), land acknowledgements

2. From the University of Idaho’s webpage on mission, vision, and values (as of February 25, 2024): “The University of Idaho is the state’s land-grant research university. From this distinctive origin and identity, we will enhance the scientific, economic, social, legal and cultural assets of our state and develop solutions for complex problems facing our society. We will continue to deliver focused excellence in teaching, research, outreach and engagement in a collaborative environment at our residential main campus in Moscow, regional centers, extension offices and research facilities across Idaho. Consistent with the land-grant ideal, we will ensure that our outreach activities serve the state and strengthen our teaching, scholarly and creative capacities statewide.”

may conceal the initial and continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples from the land that financed or currently houses these institutions (Harvey 2023). When land acknowledgments suffer these issues, they “leave ‘unthought’ how deeply colonization shapes the present, including the current position and systemic advantages of settler citizens” (Stein 2022, 22) and allow *pioneer veneration*, under the guise of respect and honor, to thrive.

Decolonizing in Library and Archives

Decolonization in both American and Canadian archives and libraries is still an emerging practice and rhetoric. Caswell’s 2017 article on identifying the elements of white supremacy in archives is a seminal article in the field of critical archiving, and introduced many radical concepts, perhaps most notably a useful framework for understanding the many ways white supremacy manifests in library collections and archives. This work builds upon concepts put forth by both Robin DiAngelo (2011) and Peggy McIntosh (1989), notably integrating DiAngelo’s concepts on white fragility with McIntosh’s earlier seminal work on the “invisible knapsack of white privilege.” Those findings, insights, and interventions were then formulated into a list of a well-defined manifestations of white privilege and supremacy in the archive and archival practice, with proposed specific interventions (Caswell 2017).

Caswell’s often-cited text helped pave the way for some of the specific interventions we see in GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums), such as revising subject headings and other damaging language, providing content warnings, and a still burgeoning movement towards institutions respecting and embracing community knowledge over the reproduction of institutional authority. Caswell’s ongoing liberatory archival praxis and theorizing is itself heavily inspired by long running community-based archives such as the South Asian American Digital Archive (which Caswell co-founded) and the Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Project and Archive (of which one of authors of this article is a long-term co-creator) (Caswell 2021; Cotera 2018, 2021). Our work is also indebted to scholars like Fobazi Ettarh, whose seminal article on vocational awe is foundational to our thinking on pioneer veneration. Ettarh (2018) wrote: “Vocational awe describes the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique.” Arguably, pioneer veneration is a specific symptom of vocational awe.

Another high-profile archival and collections “decolonization” effort is the Traditional Knowledge Labels system created by Local Contexts, an organization founded by non-Indigenous scholars Kim Christen and Jane Anderson. Also known

as TK Labels, the web site for this effort (localcontexts.org) explains that it seeks to establish a degree of Indigenous control over items not directly held by Indigenous people. Originally intended as a form of digital repatriation, this system ideally allows for Indigenous groups who are able and willing to partner with the TK Labels effort to exert a degree of control over belongings and materials not in the tribe's direct possession. On the negative side, this effort is itself arguably another extractive process wherein non-Indigenous interests benefit from performing a type of liberal saviourism that imposes a Western model of archives and knowledge production while doing little to meaningfully repatriate materials (Seiferle-Valencia, forthcoming). Further, this effort, despite being conceived by non-Indigenous people, has successfully branded and installed itself as an authority on Indigenous knowledges, while itself being a direct product of a public LFCU ethos.

While some of the first academic mentions of the term “decolonization” date back to 1986, the praxis itself has much deeper roots in Indigenous social movements for sovereignty and civil rights, such as the “Indians of All Tribes” movement, whose members famously seized Alcatraz from November of 1968 to June 1971. Native American protesters practiced a form of radical decolonization when they spray painted “Indians Welcome” and “Home of the Free Indian Land” on the penitentiary's dock signage and water tower, and followed those slogans with actual occupation for more than a year and a half (Johnson 2024).

According to Google Trends, “decolonization” as a term has been steadily gaining interest over time, with a notable uptick in interest and frequency of searching starting in 2019. Similarly, a brief search of the Library and Information Science Abstracts database reveals an uptick in articles and other content containing the term “decolonization.” What can be inferred from this sudden interest in decolonization? From a positive perspective, the relative explosion of scholarly interest in the topic might stem from the increased self-representation and advocacy of Indigenous people in the general North American consciousness. Painful battles such as the 2016–17 Standing Rock pipeline protests created unprecedented opportunities for broad activism and collaboration among Native and First Nations peoples, which in turn has helped cultivate a burgeoning and growing “Land Back” movement that has pierced through to a non-Indigenous audience. A similarly positive perspective might imagine that some of the emerging scholars who are now publishing on this topic represent the maturation and expansion of librarian and archival preparatory programs to engage with topics like de/colonization. Prominent Native, First Nations, and Métis information science scholars such as Debbie Reese, Marisa Duarte, Kayla Lar-Son, Kisha Supernant, Lorisia MacLeod, and Sandy Littletree are creating powerful decolonial praxis and scholarship that centers Indigenous sovereignty and collaboration over extraction.

The more skeptical perspective recognizes that librarianship and archival work remain overwhelmingly white and non-Indigenous professions. The 2022 ITHAKA and Society of American Archivists “A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report” found that 84 percent of respondents working in the field were white, and only two percent self-identified as Native American or Native Alaskan (Skinner and Holbert 2022, 66). What to make then of all this decolonial work being taken up by non-Indigenous, predominantly white, people? Perhaps *decolonization* is simply the white-guilt alleviating term *du jour*, a term non-Indigenous people enthusiastically co-opt without making a meaningful effort to wrestle with weighty topics such as sovereignty, repatriation, and dispossession. Perhaps the wide deployment of the term, while so few Indigenous people work in libraries and archives, is itself representative of a type of white extraction of Indigenous knowledge. Similarly, *decolonization* may have replaced *diversity, equity, and inclusion* as the sort of catch-all phrase a librarian or archivist applies to their work when attempting to make it more inclusive, representative, or equitable to marginalized people. This practice too has roots in extraction, with the goal of professional advancement or knowledge production, without the deeper and often lengthy process required to even begin to imagine a truly decolonized approach.

To this conversation surrounding decolonization, we contribute *pioneer veneration*, a term that does not intend to describe a decolonization praxis, but rather identifies the decidedly colonial perspectives and attitudes of LFCUs built into uncritical celebrations of their founding and history. By articulating and thus troubling conscious and subconscious *pioneer veneration*, we can call attention to historic and contemporary ways LFCUs have couched their extractive organizational model in the language of public good and nation building.

The Inertia of *Pioneer Veneration*

Pioneer veneration as a mindset and as an activity has long characterized the creation of settler colony national narratives. That narrativization has been the work of many, including government officials, professional historians, and lay people engaged in the celebration and perpetuation of community stories. *Pioneer veneration* can be identified in the way government programs operate, the design of public spaces, and the creation stories of communities. We started using the term *pioneer veneration* in our internal discussions as a way to describe our experiences at an LFCU, and later discovered the work of historian James Joseph Buss, who offers arguably the most comprehensive study of American *pioneer veneration* and its origins. In his book *Winning the West with Words*, Buss (2011) articulates the impulses of settlers in rapidly developing parts of America’s lower Great Lakes region to enshrine their

pioneering efforts in writing. Pioneer and Old Settler Associations grew in number and significance in the latter nineteenth century, spurred by the country's centennial in 1876. These associations, through community celebrations, publications, and monuments, "encouraged pioneer veneration and stressed the transformation of the physical landscape at the hands of industrious men" (p. 171). Importantly, these same actors established historical societies in countless communities to curate and preserve records of significance. "Many of the individuals involved in the creation of historical societies who provided the public with accounts of the past, and historians with the sources to craft their interpretations," Buss argues, "were closely connected to the celebratory culture of pioneer veneration" (p. 198).

For our purposes, we are interested in exploring and interrogating the pernicious effects of *pioneer veneration* in self-styled neutral spaces dedicated to preserving historic records for the benefit of current and future generations. As we proceed, we offer the following characteristics as defining *pioneer veneration*.

- *Pioneer veneration* idealizes and romanticizes the actions of the predominantly white actors that moved into formerly uncolonized spaces to establish permanent settlements modeled after typical Western communities. There is a particular effort to frame all effects of this settlement as contributing to a collective good.
- *Pioneer veneration* actively erases, marginalizes, or peripheralizes Indigenous people by absenting their histories from official narratives or by applying a settler-cultural perspective to their histories.
- *Pioneer veneration* excludes from official narratives the actions that enabled settler activity, including violence, fraud, and coercion, to perpetuate a story of building something from nothing or subduing the wilderness of a peopleless land.
- *Pioneer veneration* deploys genesis amnesia to position an institution as a current ally to Indigenous people.³ By abstracting a modern institution from its historical roots, organizations can perform allyship (such as reading land acknowledgement statements) while simultaneously minimizing current and historical harms associated with their actions.
- *Pioneer veneration* reinforces broad efforts to geographically displace Indigenous communities and homogenize their existence. This is especially true in the US West where LFCUs have manufactured and perpetuated perceptions of resource abundance and population scarcity through their research and instruction priorities.

Pioneer veneration is a strand of colonial thinking that persists because it has been so intrinsically woven into the fabrics of trusted institutions as to be nearly invisible to most, especially those in the dominant culture. At the University of Idaho, the

3. "Genesis amnesia" was defined by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990, 9) as "the naïve illusion that things have always been as they are." Later work by Nash (2019, 466) proposed that "it is genesis amnesia that allows us to believe that 'democracy's colleges' were founded primarily to increase access to higher education."

evidence of *pioneer veneration* is hidden in plain sight. Morrill Hall, named for the same senator that championed the land-grant legislation, is one of the longest-standing buildings on campus. Sweet Avenue, which terminates in the center of campus, is named for Idaho's first United States Representative and a fierce supporter of the silver mining industry that forever changed the environment of north Idaho. In the center of the historic campus green is a statue of a soldier dedicated to the memory of students who fought and died in the Spanish-American War, a conflict widely acknowledged as American empire building. There is even an explicit memorial to pioneers situated next to the university's stately Administration Building. Known as the Memorial Steps, the monument has sixteen broad stairs leading from a sidewalk to a mature garden. It was constructed in 1934 with stones salvaged from the university's original administration building, which burned down in 1906. While many today assume that the memorial is dedicated to that first iteration of the institution, newspaper coverage from the time characterized it as a "memorial dedicated to the state's pioneers" (*Idaho Argonaut* 1934, 6).

In the case of the University of Idaho Library, one form *pioneer veneration* takes is allocating significant resources to the preservation of historical records related to Idaho's settlement and industrial development in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though it has demonstrably been part of the library's work for generations, only very recently did faculty members begin identifying the practice as *pioneer veneration*. In part, this shift in consciousness came about when a new department head was hired for Special Collections and Archives. The incoming archivist had previously been employed as the director of a county historical society and museum, which was a descendant organization of a pioneer association. In its earliest years, the pioneer association had required members to verify their familial connection to land homestead claimants. The legacy of the pioneer association was ever-present in the modern historical society's collections and articulated with some frequency by current members. Such explicit *pioneer veneration* imparted on the director-turned-department head a sensitivity to the ways that mindset manifests itself. As she met with her new colleagues and discussed the need to proactively counter venerating impulses in the archives, a new framework for understanding developed across departments.

Strategies for Decolonization in Libraries and Archives

Over the last five years or so, University of Idaho librarians have been engaging with scholarship surrounding decolonization. As librarians, we recognize that both our archival and print collections are not representative of the state's diversity, and those collections are perpetuating an inaccurate understanding of our world, both past

and present. As shown, scholarship concerned with decolonization in libraries and archives grew significantly in recent years. Libraries have explored various methods for addressing the colonial legacies inherent in our institutions. St. John's University Library, for example, shifted the focus of their collection policy from *what* the library acquired to *why* it would acquire a new resource (Fuchs and Ball 2023). Librarians in both the United States and Canada have advocated for more inclusive and careful cataloguing language (see Parent 2015; Vaughan 2018). Encouraging professionals to adopt Indigenous librarianship practices is another avenue towards decolonization. Indigenous librarianship calls upon individuals to "be proactive and seek opportunities outside of their formal education to learn about Indigenous knowledge practices, gain cultural competencies, and become familiar with how to best provide service to Indigenous communities" (A. Edwards 2019, 6). Archivists, for their part, have also been wrestling with redressing the harms of colonialism. Important scholarship over the last decade focuses on moving from "diversity and inclusion" to justice and liberation in archival description, using digital access strategically to expand representation, and critically rethinking archival instruction (see E. Edwards 2022; Sutherland and Purcell 2021; Warren 2020).

The desire to redress the harms of colonial practices is genuine in our library, but the development of a comprehensive strategy for adopting reparative actions has been slow to materialize. This, we argue, should be partially attributed to the university's continued adherence to *pioneer veneration*. The genesis amnesia underpinning *pioneer veneration* allows too many decision makers to feel disconnected or even absolved from the realities of dispossession and oppression that have made LFCUs possible. Interrupting traditional library and archives operations is often uncomfortable and requires additional time and attention, but through committed action our profession can take meaningful steps towards remediation. At our institution, two projects over the last few years have provided opportunities to put these ideas into practice.

1. Countering Pioneer Veneration in the University of Idaho Library

The first example comes from the University of Idaho Library's Special Collections and Archives. It is important to note that this department's collections, despite being housed on the traditional homelands of the Nimiipuu or Nez Perce Tribe, contain very few references to Indigenous peoples. Among the approximately 30,000 cubic feet of material under the department's care, the vast majority relates to the industrial history of the state, the history of the university, and the lives of white settlers in the region. Though there was never an official collection policy to the effect, it is an archive dedicated to pioneers. The presence, therefore, of a photograph collection

described as containing more than one thousand “prints and negatives of Nez Perce Indians” immediately raised questions for the new department head. The photo collection, consisting of both studio portraits and less formal group pictures, had been donated to the university’s anthropology lab in the 1990s by the family of a former National Park Service (NPS) employee. A few years later, the materials were transferred to the library, fully catalogued into the archives, and made available to the public for research. Yet by 2023, there were serious questions about the provenance of the collection and general unease about the department’s right to manage access to the photos. As a result, the department had a de facto policy of closing the collection to researchers and suppressing the online finding aid. While we felt positively about not perpetuating the colonial objectification of human beings, we also knew that this valuable collection of community history was now hidden from the very people it represented.

For that reason, we began to consider if the collection should be given to the Nez Perce Tribe. On the one hand, removing arguably the largest collection related to Indigenous history from the archives would further concentrate pioneer representation. If thoughtful researchers wanted to study Nimiipuu history, this loss of access could hurt good scholarship. Such a transfer—commonly referred to as repatriation—might also imply that the original acquisition was nefarious. Questions about the provenance of the photos were connected to the NPS employee that assembled the collection, but the decades-long possession by the university was also problematic. All these perceived risks, however, were rooted in self-interest and traditional ideas about archival authority. On the other hand, transferring this collection’s stewardship to the Nez Perce Tribe allowed it to become more visible and accessible to the children and grandchildren of those in the photographs. It would return a collected body of knowledge to the subjects from which that knowledge was extracted. It was, we came to realize, the right thing to do.

In the summer of 2023, the head of the archives contacted the Nez Perce Tribe’s Cultural Resource Program Director to discuss transferring the photo collection. The program director was familiar with the collection and the individual who had assembled it in the 1980s and 1990s. At some point in the past, part of the photo collection had been scanned and digital copies of images were provided to the Nez Perce Tribe. There was immediate agreement that the best location for the assembled photos was the sovereign nation’s headquarters, located about an hour from our university library. With an interest in sharing as many university resources as possible, the return conditions included all the archival storage materials that the photos had been housed in since cataloguing. The department head also offered to have all the photos scanned at the university’s current preservation standards.

Digital copies of the historic photos would increase access for community use and act as a backup collection should something unfortunate happen to the physical items. By offering to provide the manual labor and technical oversight needed to scan more than one thousand photos, the library intentionally redirected assets gained through the land-grant process back towards Indigenous people who continue to feel the effects of that dispossession. Finally, our library offered to maintain a redundant copy of the digitized collection in our archival storage drive, with the understanding that we would not use or grant access to those materials. Though small in measure, the effort is rooted in deep self-reflection and a sincere desire to generate opportunities for reparative actions. The final transfer of the photos and the digital files was completed in 2024.

2. The Donald E. Crabtree Lithic Technology Collection

While the collection described above represents a collection held completely by the University of Idaho Library, in contrast the Donald E. Crabtree Lithic Technology Collection (the Crabtree Collection) is held by the University of Idaho's Alfred W. Bowers Laboratory of Anthropology. This collection is oriented around Donald Crabtree, a prolific flintknapper and co-founder of the field of experimental archaeology. It holds his personal and professional archive but is primarily composed of stone items created by Crabtree over his long and prolific lifetime practicing as a working flintknapper and lithic technologist. Approximately 10–15 percent of the items in this collection are unprovenanced stone artifacts that were created by Indigenous peoples and primarily surface-collected by Crabtree or his contemporaries. In 2020, the Bowers Laboratory approached the University of Idaho Library about pursuing a Council on Library and Information Resources Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant to create high quality 3D digital models and 2D cataloguing photos of these stone items, as well as to digitize Crabtree's archive.

From the first discussions of this grant-funded digitization project, we recognized the importance of sharing how Crabtree's own flintknapping built upon the knowledge, practices, and techniques utilized by uncredited Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. Multiple strategies were considered and conceptualized to meet this ambitious goal. One strategy we employed was to create a "Learn" section on the webpage, which we used to highlight Indigenous flintknappers, introduce visitors to the history of experimental archaeology and flintknapping, and discuss how to respect cultural heritage while flintknapping. With this page we sought to educate visitors about the positives and negatives of online flintknapping content and to highlight Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. Other initial concepts

centred around incorporating a standard “advisory board” model, as there was an existing board for the Bowers Laboratory. After some consideration and conversation with stakeholders, this model evolved into a different vision that allowed for Native and First Nations experts in archaeology, anthropology, and cultural preservation to speak from their positions of expertise and opinion on the overall Crabtree Collection. This path was chosen as we identified three core goals for advisory group work:

- To foreground contemporary Native and First Nations experts and scholars in archaeology, anthropology, and cultural preservation.
- To provide excellent compensation for an interview and series of consultation meetings. A key part of this was not approaching our advisory board with the intention that *they* would provide labor by reviewing individual items.
- Listening and taking radical action as relating to Indigenous provenanced items.

Incorporating Indigenous Voices on the Crabtree Collection

The overall concept of an Indigenous advisory board was suggested to us by our university’s Executive Director of Tribal Relations. We began by consulting with local Native American cultural heritage experts who already had an existing relationship with the university and by drawing from our personal networks. These pre-grant, early conversations yielded two commitments from cultural heritage experts and exposed issues that we would run into throughout the grant (such as the challenge of identifying Indigenous experts in flintknapping who were interested in working with the compensatory bureaucracies of the land-grant institution).

When our two committed advisors did not follow up with us in the actual grant period after sustained efforts to contact them, we began to rethink and rework our “ask.” Our concept of this ask began to shift away from asking our board members to create content about the Crabtree Collection or review and discuss individual collection items—which would have centered the work of a single white man—and towards more critical conversations about the colonial narratives that surround the art and practice of flintknapping today. As such, we decided to instead recruit for our board Indigenous experts in GLAM and anthropology/archaeology and to ask them to participate in an interview with two of the project principal investigators (PIs), during which they could leverage their disciplinary and personal expertise on topics and challenges related to this collection. Advisory board members are enrolled members of Tribes and First Nations from both the United States and Canada, and were asked to speak from their personal positions as both Indigenous peoples and experts in their fields.

Praxis of Compensating Experts

A key concern in our compensation plans was to actively counter the often extractive engagement seen between land-grants and communities of research origin, by making sure to offer outstanding compensation and a well-defined ask and scope of work. We decided to award each board member a \$2,500 honorarium for two main tasks: attendance at two board meetings, and participation in an interview with project PIs. This work totaled three to five hours per person over the year. One of the most crucial considerations informing our thoughts included making sure to engage folks at a level that was appropriate to their status as leaders and experts, and as part of this we invited our advisory board team to co-construct their interview topics and questions. Additionally, our advisory board members were given the option to edit both their video interviews and transcripts post discussion, as well as set limits on the display and use of the interviews created. Throughout these efforts, our grant PIs aimed to foreground Native American and First Nations knowledge and expertise as contemporary, insightful, and necessary.

Another important goal with these interviews was to ensure that they were accessible to the broader community. In addition to sharing the videos and providing full-text transcripts, we also plan to share our interviews using Oral History as Data, an open source static website tool that combines analysis and presentation features to create more opportunities for users to engage with qualitative information. Within it, the interview recordings will be placed right next to the transcript text and website visitors can navigate directly to a certain point in the video using hyperlinked timestamps (Image 1). A unique feature of Oral History as Data that we hope to leverage in the future is coding/tagging the transcripts for common themes, which would allow visitors to identify subsets of interviews, and the actual quoted text, that referred to topics of interest (such as erasure of Indigenous knowledge, cultural appropriation, craft as relationship building, and the modern legacy of the Crabtree Collection). We are still implementing Oral History as Data on the website, and for now the interviews with our Advisory Board members are available as static video files with text file transcripts.⁴

4. See <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/crabtree/perspectives.html>.

All of the -- the cultural appropriation that has been going on and ongoing and still ongoing every Thanksgiving and Halloween and whatnot in mainstream America, it, it's something where the conversation is exciting to see now that your project here that we're a part of is, uh, taking that on. So I guess thinking of the Crabtree Collection, it's a fascinating moment to engage with the complexity of what it means to bring forward those who've never understood or considered the marginalized voices of Native people and, uh, give people who have, you know, an invested interest and emotional ties to artifacts, um, that -- that proper recognition and seat at the table to converse about it.

00:3:30

Richard Meyers
(YouTube)

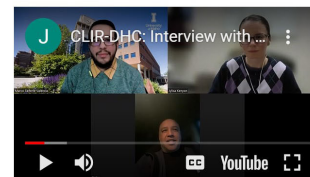


FIGURE 1 Draft view of an interview.

Choosing Not to Display Unprovenanced Indigenous Artifacts

Originally, we intended for the 3D models on the project site to mostly include lithic items created by Donald Crabtree, as well as artifacts in the collection that were created by Indigenous people. Our initial proposal and decision to include artifacts created by Indigenous people was informed by our desire to avoid the further erasure of Indigenous knowledge within flintknapping. The artifacts in the Crabtree Collection that were created by Indigenous people were typically selected, collected, and at times looted by Crabtree or his friends and colleagues because they represented exemplary materials or styles of flintknapping technique. Unfortunately, because these artifacts do not have clear provenance or discernible origin, it is unlikely that repatriation based on surface-level artifact characteristics would be an option. However, this project has opened explorations into using advanced identification of rock and stone materials to facilitate a rough analysis of the materials origins, in the hope that repatriation could be an option in the future.

Following our continued work on this project—expanded understandings of how these Indigenous artifacts were collected and their lack of provenance, our own interrogation of the ethics of both archaeology and librarianship/archival science, and most importantly our conversations with our advisory board members—we decided that it would be unethical to display on the public project website the approximately forty-two 3D models we created from unprovenanced Indigenous artifacts. To do so would go against the First Archivist Circle’s “Protocols for Native American Archival Materials,” which states, “Be cautious in approving access or use requests, if the requests appear to conflict with the Protocols, until appropriate tribal community representatives can be consulted and have had ample time to consider these issues for culturally affiliated materials” (First Archivist Circle 2007, 6). Because

these artifacts are unprovenanced, we have been unable to speak with appropriate Tribal representatives to learn more about how, or if, they want these artifacts shared. It is also worth mentioning that about half of these forty-two models were created through managerial miscommunications to digitization staff: the conceptual decision to not digitize Indigenous belongings had already been made and yet some Indigenous items were still digitized. Here, the grant leadership team found another opportunity to resist the false insecurities of white supremacy, deciding to proceed with fewer models on the website instead of sharing the items we felt it would be unethical to display.

Another change to our project output had to do with the 2D photos of approximately 1,600 unprovenanced Indigenous artifacts. After conversing with our advisory board in 2022 and early 2023, we had originally decided to share these on the website, but changed our mind in early 2024 during the last few months of our project. The reasoning shared in the previous paragraph informed this decision, as did recent changes to the United States Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. One of these changes requires that (Department of the Interior 2022, Subpart A §10.1(b) Applicability):

Museums and Federal agencies must defer to the customs, traditions, and Native American traditional knowledge of lineal descendants, Indian Tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations.

Fitz Gibbon (2023) explains that:

The means of identifying an object as a funerary object, sacred object, or object of cultural patrimony subject to repatriation may also be defined according to a lineal descendant, Indian Tribe, or Native Hawaiian organization and based on “Native American traditional knowledge” instead of scientific or historical evidence.

Since these artifacts were unprovenanced, we were unable to confirm whether they were funerary, sacred, or of cultural patrimony. Even if they were not any of these, we determined it would be unethical to display these 2D photos on the project website because we didn’t have permission from their creators or their associated Tribes. Our decision to not display the 3D models or the 2D photos of unprovenanced artifacts is documented on the project’s “About” page. Additionally, in an effort to avoid the further erasure of Indigenous flintknapping knowledge in this collection and to uphold our agreement with the grant agency, all metadata for digitized objects, including metadata about these artifacts, can be downloaded on the project website.⁵ In addition, all 2D photos and 3D models will be preserved by our library’s Center for Digital Inquiry and Learning. In the future, we would like to examine opportunities

5. Starting at <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/crabtree/artifacts/data.html>, click “Download Complete Data” to access the metadata associated with all objects digitized in 2D and 3D for this project.

to centre the unprovenanced artifacts in this collection in ways that do not involve displaying their facsimiles. One way we could do this is by creating a separate subpage for unprovenanced Indigenous artifacts. This page would include the metadata for each item, but instead of showing the 2D photographs or the 3D model for each artifact, a message declaring “Unprovenanced Indigenous Artifact—Not Available to the Public” could be used as a thumbnail. Each item’s record could also include a link to the “About” page where we discuss why we have decided not to show the facsimiles of these items. This type of presentation could make it more obvious to website visitors that these artifacts do exist within the Crabtree Collection and potentially encourage visitors to deeply engage with the critiques of flintknapping and surface collecting, as discussed by our advisory board members.

Call to Action

As we have established, the propensity towards *pioneer veneration* is baked into the foundations and character of land-financed colleges and universities. For generations, institutional libraries and archives have consciously and unconsciously romanticized settler experiences, minimized Indigenous histories, perpetuated myths of a peopleless wilderness, and pursued allyship undermined by genesis amnesia, leading to the wide-spread adoption and maintenance of what Stein (2022, 22) calls “settler memory:”

To be oriented by settler memory is not necessarily to be an outright supporter of colonization or to be entirely ignorant of the colonial past, but rather to leave “unthought” how deeply colonization shapes the present, including the current position and systemic advantages of settler citizens. Allowing the enduring impacts of colonization to remain unthought in turn limits the kinds of futures, practices, and solidarities that are imaginable, often resulting in uncritical desires for settler futurity.

The challenges of confronting *pioneer veneration* and settler memory became strikingly obvious when working with the Crabtree Collection. Team members and employees had varying levels of capacity and preparedness to engage with the desired decolonial aspects of this grant as initially conceived. As such, while initial grant scoping conversations amongst PIs reflected alignment on our decolonization goals, in practice, different team members’ comfort with various anti-racist and decolonial strategies resulted in disconnects, and in some cases drove conflict and miscommunication. Unfortunately, many attempts to begin the training and work necessary to help bring the skills of the whole crew (including student employees) up to a base level of knowledge and cultural competency were resisted by some, which meant a shared perspective and starting point were not established. At times this led to some harmful impacts, including a sometimes-negative work environment, digitization of things that should not have been digitized, and pushback against important directions or invitations to build cultural competency. Our experiences with this grant and other projects have confirmed that building the skills needed

to resist *pioneer veneration*, and more importantly to address its persistent harmful impacts, will take a concerted effort on the part of library and archival professionals working in LFCUs.

Resisting *pioneer veneration* is only possible when library and archival professionals respect the sovereignty of the Native American, First Nations, and other Indigenous peoples we work with. This means decentring ourselves and instead centring their priorities, expectations, and timelines, even if they conflict with our own. It means using their chosen mode of communication and recognizing that their rate of engagement might bump up against our LFCU's "as soon as possible" culture. It also means accepting "not right now," "no," and a lack of response to our inquiries as valid answers to proposed partnerships. With these tenets of respect guiding our work, a coalition of archivists and librarians at the University of Idaho has committed to disrupting our institution's patterns of *pioneer veneration*. Through our discussions and preliminary efforts we have identified a few important steps for ensuring our actions speak as loudly as our words.

First, both for ourselves and our colleagues, we must recognize and articulate the discomfort that so often accompanies the work of decolonization. As was the case with the photo collection held in our archives, it was apparent that our continued possession felt inappropriate and even problematic. That "not quite right" feeling hung in the air for several years, but no one in the archives felt empowered to pursue an alternative arrangement until a new head of Special Collections and Archives was hired. Similarly, our initial conceptions of the advisory board also felt "not quite right," and through continued discussions we realized how problematic our initial asks would have been. But looking back, there were times when this "not quite right" feeling was overpowered by our concerns with meeting stated grant project objectives, leading us to doubt the work we were doing and to question whether we should just give up our efforts because of the friction created. Inertia may be vexing, but it can easily become a comfortable place to settle when movement will inevitably cause friction. Being willing to face discomfort is a critical first step.

Secondly, we must be open to deep self-reflection, both of our professional and personal assumptions. Dominant ideas about adequate archival storage conditions, open access to collections, and acceptable provenance are rooted in Western values that do not validate Indigenous cultural practices or ways of knowing. LFCUs are modeled as good-willed but authoritative institutions where information is gathered and disseminated. The photo collection in the University of Idaho's possession was assembled by a non-Indigenous man as a historic record for a group he styled as part of the past. It was donated to the anthropology department's collection, further perpetuating ideas about a hierarchy of civilization. Later it was transferred to the

library's archives out of concerns for appropriate storage conditions and facilitating connections with other historic records. Additionally, although we recognize the disciplinary and creative merits of Donald Crabtree and the Crabtree Collection overall, this collection was also assembled by a white man who did not formally recognize the Indigenous creators he learned from and whose knowledge he built upon. And as mentioned above, this collection also included unprovenanced Indigenous artifacts that he and his contemporaries surface collected. Prior work with this collection omitted these facts. All of this, in the light of our profession's evolving understanding of colonialism, is troubling and must be addressed.

Finally, *pioneer veneration* will not be disrupted through passive recognition alone. Compensatory opportunities call for creativity and boldness on the part of library professionals who may not immediately recognize their ability to advance reparation efforts. Coordinating the return of materials, offering the resources needed to digitize archival items, and serving as a secure storage site for redundant copies of digital items are examples of ways our university library could distribute the resource wealth of an LFCU. Those options did not require either administrative action or budgetary permission, two barriers that can significantly hamper reparative efforts. *Pioneer veneration* can also be disrupted by finding ways to centre Indigenous voices when working with these collections and providing appropriate and excellent compensation for their work.

We are hopeful that by contributing the term *pioneer veneration* to the field's ongoing conversations around decolonization, attention is drawn to the longstanding and persistent practice of uncritically celebrating settler experiences. Even in the absence of collections that contain obviously troubled materials, like Indigenous items obtained through theft or coercion, LFCU libraries and archives have a responsibility to assess their holdings for *pioneer veneration*. Future scholarship in the field may explore how a repository's scope of collections can be used to push back on *pioneer veneration*, as well as strategies for a continued and evolving praxis of non-extractive collaboration between LFCUs and Indigenous communities.

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