

## **Archive of Relatives: Curating a Bodily Archive through Indigenous Understandings of Objects**

There is something so compelling about an attempt to catalogue one's body. A bodily archive offers a space to rethink who we are and who we are responsible for. In Julietta Singh's (2018) *No Archive Will Restore You*, she describes a bodily archive as "a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself" (29). A bodily archive is the tracing and cataloguing of the always unfurling parts of ourselves. A bodily archive is not about the static preservation and description attached to ideas of the normative archive—a bodily archive welcomes change and fluidity and honours all parts of ourselves. The bodily archive, then, is profoundly personal. Curating one's bodily archive allows us to understand the ways that our bodies are always relational (Singh 2018, 2; Grosz 1994, 142). As Elizabeth Grosz explains, our bodies have specific and inherent meanings because of the differing histories, legacies, and relations to power that are held in our bodies (1994, 141). Tracing our history through archival research is not new but curating this archive through the body offers a unique alternative. This alternative archive is essential because of the violence and trauma that is woven into traditional archives for Indigenous Peoples. As an Indigenous person, my family's histories and knowledges were intentionally destroyed through colonial record-keeping. The knowledge housed in archives today often contains distorted and violent records of Indigenous Peoples and, moreover, we are often denied access to these records (Mootz 2020, 265). The bodily archive thus represents an anti-colonial response to the projects of archiving. This idea is reflected in works from Narungga scholar, Dr. Natalie Harkin, and Miami, Eastern Shawnee, and Euroamerican scholar, Dr. Malea Powell.

In her book, Julietta Singh's (2018) brief fixation on objects provides a tangible opening to curating my bodily archive. This method of archiving centers expansive understandings of history that are not concerned with the bloodied colonial record-keeping methods. It may recognize this history, but it does not depend on it. The cataloguing of a bodily archive may be complicated because the borders of the body are not clear, as Singh argues, we "extend into space well beyond the skin" (2018, 30). Objects, then, become part of bodies in very real ways. They become the "exterior double for what is already inside me" (Singh 2018, 40). This understanding of objects pairs well with Cree understandings of other-than-human relations that see certain objects as relatives (Loyer 2021, 8). Thus, this project will curate an archive of relatives. The following text provides the theoretical background of my curation project. The objects (relatives) will be catalogued and explored through tracing their histories and legacies (Appendix). My archive of relatives refigures Indigenous relations to the archive.

The curation of my bodily archive is deeply personal but is reflective of Indigenous theory and knowledges. I have Métis, Cree, Dane-zaa (Beaver), and settler perspectives that shape my understanding of a bodily archive, but this understanding is also influenced by many communities and the knowledges shared by Indigenous scholars from Turtle Island and Australia. The perspectives from other communities, such as Narungga and Eastern Shawnee nations, demonstrate how a bodily archive is a concept Indigenous Peoples are already familiar with. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of communities that use this concept, nor is the bodily archive a pan-Indigenous concept.

Jessie Loyer (2021) calls for a disruption of curating collections in cultural memory institutions that center singular joy – specifically white male singular joy. She states that when

collections are curated from a personal joy it creates an authoritative narrative about what our history is that ignores many voices (Loyer 2021, 4-5). These thoughts brought up important questions for me as I considered curating my personal bodily archive. It is a personal endeavour – I am selecting items (relatives) and describing their histories and legacies myself. Is this curation process reducing the expansive relationality and kinship that are present in these relatives? How could I curate a bodily archive not based in singular joy? What does a community-informed bodily archive look like? These questions also echo Singh’s statement that “the body is not and has never been singular” (2018, 2). Similarly, Grosz’s assertion that the body is meaningful through relations and genealogy asks that I understand my body as plural and community built (1994, 142). So, if the body is not singular and has meaning because of its relations to others, is it even possible to have a singular bodily archive? Or does this thinking attempt to avoid my responsibility to community curation? This is a tension that must be balanced. The relatives I have selected have relations with humans and other-than-humans beyond myself. Their inclusion in my archive is not their entire life – they expand into other bodies and worlds.

To understand the potential of a bodily archive, though, we first must understand the violence that is inherent in traditional archives. Narunga scholar, Natalie Harkin, recounts the violent records held in places like archives that distort the lives and histories of her Indigenous family members (2014, 2-3). Her experiences going through the records the state kept of her family demonstrate the ways that colonial archiving intends to destroy Indigenous Peoples (Harkin 2014, 4). This method of record-keeping places the state in control of what is done with these records (ibid.). Cree-Métis librarian Jessie Loyer agrees with this sentiment as she says,

“Indigenous communities have too often had restricted access to the information created about them and have been largely made absent from the process of dissemination of these knowledges” (2021, 8). The holding and controlling of records that catalogue the violence committed against Indigenous communities cause great harm to us. As Malea Powell (Miami, Eastern Shawnee, and Euroamerican) states, “the damage done by documents, by words, has been at least as great as that done by weapons” (2008, 116). This pain is reflected in Wiradjuri poet Jeanine Leane’s work “Cardboard Incarceration,” where she writes:

This cardboard prison they call an archive  
is cold, airless and silent as death.  
Floor to ceiling boxes contain voices  
no longer heard yet still wailing within  
and faces no longer seen yet still missing in a  
jail of captured snippets, images and memories  
like the severed heads and bleached bones of  
dismembered bodies neatly locked away in the vaults  
of museums and universities of the world  
in the name of science or history or anthropology or  
something else so important at the time that  
justified the collection of bits and pieces of another –  
the Other.

Traditional archives have always had violent and oppressive relations with Indigenous Peoples, which cannot be easily repaired. However, there is space for an alternative that charts our

histories and relations on our terms for those of us severed from community record-keeping practices.

Indigenous scholars have previously noted the potential of bodily archives. Harkin writes that “our bodies too are archives where memories, stories, and lived experiences are stored, etched and anchored in our bloodlines deep” (2014, 4). Powell explains that “meaning is sometimes held captive by the body” (2008, 117). So, what I suggest as an alternative to the traditional archive is not new, but projects of archiving in this way need to be centered. Settler scholar, Kaylee Jangula Mootz, suggests that creating and curating materials by contemporary Indigenous Peoples offers “one way to heal the wounds of the ... archive” (2020, 266). Harkin explains that being present in sites like the archives “disrupt colonial narratives beyond the old disciplines of knowledge productions” (2014, 6). Curating my bodily archive through relatives allows me to answer these calls.

I find Singh’s (2018) suggestion that objects are a part of ourselves and our histories compelling (40). Objects become physical manifestations and reminders of clusters of feelings and memories (Singh 2018.). In a literal sense, they become a part of our bodies – we cannot separate the memory from that specific object. We have built a relationship. For me, this understanding of objects comes from Indigenous understandings of more-than-human relations. Speaking from a memory institution perspective, Loyer explains that “because Indigenous concepts of collections are less about the physical objects and more about being in relationship with these objects, these items are our relatives” (2021, 8). This is not a metaphor. Métis scholar Sherry Farrell Racette describes many of the Cree words for materials used for artmaking (hides, quills, beads) as being animate themselves – she explains that in the Cree language “women

worked with living media on living surfaces to construct messages for an unseen viewer, actively engaging the spirit world through their artwork” (2009, 287-288). We can see that the Cree language and understanding construct these objects as living. So, objects are animate and our relatives. Angela Fey supports this thinking as she argues that “artefacts and identities are intertwined – objects connect people with experiences, memories and history” (2017, 76). Fey’s master’s thesis created object biographies and traced “the material history of individuals where there is little recorded in the conventional way” (2017, 12). While this approach is perhaps the opposite of what my archive of relatives is doing (recording my bodily history through objects), her work shows how objects and the body are entwined. She explains that objects have “agency to connect us to the past, connect us to our ancestors, spark memories, teach us about cultural practices, and ‘tell’ stories of earlier times” (97). This agency she describes is the foundation of the relationships we have with objects.

When constructing an archive of relatives in this sense, we must consider how to be a good relative. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice explains that “being and becoming a good relative itself presumes active and meaningful engagement – relatives aren’t just static roles or states of being, but lived relationships” (2018, 73). So, my curatorial project is more than simply naming certain objects as relatives – it is about honouring respectful relations that are ongoing with objects in my life. This project also highlights the tension that emerges when we do not honour these relations. What does forgotten or broken relationships with objects mean? Is it the ways we discard things that once held immense meaning or is it the ways we hoard things meant to be shared? If we cannot imagine our archives as extending beyond the body’s imagined borders, are we failing this relationship between ourselves, object, and memory? The reciprocal

relationship between myself and my objects is what I am attempting to honour through this project.

When I say that objects are my relatives, this claim is supported by the thinking done by these scholars and from Cree logic. This idea most directly links to the objects like moccasins that have belonged to my family members. I also, though, want to extend this way of viewing objects to the less “sacred” of beings that I hoard within my house. These objects may not be directly tied to my Indigeneity nor a complex family history. They may be simple, or modern. It is not their literal genealogy that makes them relatives. It is the way that they hold memory and history (of my life or others) that they become a part of myself that is outside of my body. They are related to me because of this linkage we (the object and myself) hold/maintain. Angela Fey’s project considered how the complexities of mixed Indigenous identities inform archival information; she asked, “if a Métis girl had a Cree or Anishinaabe mother that she had learned beadwork style and color preference from, and thus the girl reproduced Cree, Anishinaabe, or Métis style objects, are the object she created Cree, Anishinaabe, Métis, or all three?” (2017, 80). This reflects my conundrum of being settler and Indigenous – if my archive is not comprised of entirely “Indigenous” objects, does this make this project not Indigenous (or not Indigenous enough)? This also makes me think of a Twitter thread from Joy Henderson who was criticized for not making enough “Indigenous content” (@JoyHenderson78, October 18, 2021). She points out that simply being Indigenous means that everything she creates is Indigenous content. The stereotypical imaginings that settlers have of Indigenous folks as always in moccasins, carrying tobacco, in pristine natural environments are not reflective of who contemporary Indigenous Peoples are. As Henderson notes, Indigenous people are still Indigenous when we live in cities,

play video games and drink Starbucks. So, in my project, even when the objects I am cataloguing are not explicitly Indigenous, they are still a part of my bodily history that *is* Indigenous.

As you will see in the following (brief) archive of relatives, the objects I have hold weight. They are not mere items on a shelf or things that just serve a particular purpose. They are what ground me, what feels like home, what connects me to my past. I have a relationship with these things beyond just using them. I care for them, and they care for me. They store my memory and feelings. They are part of me in the same ways that my dad, sister, and cousins are a part of me. The relatives I selected are a small snapshot of the family tree I have inherited and taken care of. By tracing my bodily archive through objects (relatives), I am cataloguing how my body is made up of more than just myself.

Appendix  
Archive of Relatives



This is a photo of my Great-Grandfather and me. My Great-Grandpa was one of the people I cherished the most. He passed away when I was four. I mourned for years as a child – I was distraught that this man who loved me so dearly was no longer around. As I got older, my memories of him faded, but this photo of the two of us was what began to hold his love for me. I remember gazing into this photo when I was upset and begging something to make me feel the love that he brought. A memory becomes a photo, and a photo becomes the only thing you have left of that love.



My mom has had this strange little Koala bear for as long as I can remember. I remember staring into its eyes when I was still small enough to sleep on the hope chest at the end of my parent's bed. It holds every anxious thought that kept me up at night as a child. The never-ending whirring of a child's mind that feels the rumbling of the furnace, like it was the roar of a dragon. Its weird little eyes would shine back at me under the light of The Tonight Show still playing on the television. Despite its oddness, it was comforting. Knowing that it also held the life of my mother – sleeping soundly on the bed behind me. The Koala was like another older sibling. Now, like another aunt to my niece, watching her gently from a shelf – offering staring contests of comfort.



This was the first piece of Indigenous-made art that was purchased for me. I was very young and standing at a booth while a summer festival occurred around me on the land known as Muskoseepi Park in Grande Prairie, AB. I looked longingly at all the beautiful pieces made from hide and ran my finger gently along the soft suedey texture. Running my fingers across this little bag brings me back to the moment of hoping my mom would feel the deep desire I had for it and the mind signals I was sending for her to buy it for me. How do you explain to your mom that the bag was calling out to you without sounding like a spoilt brat? It was buried with my special trinkets for a long time but will soon join its cousins on my shelf of special things. Or maybe I will give it to my niece and let her feel the hide on her fingertips and give her a turn to love this relative.



My dad has always been a man who shows his love mostly through actions. This sweater is evidence of the *doing* of his love. He loved this sweater dearly. He showed this love by wearing it until it was tattered. My mom begged him to stop wearing it because it was so ratty, so he kept it at the bottom of his dresser drawer. I have never seen him keep another piece of clothing like this. He wore all his love into this sweater and that love burst at the seams and stayed like oil stains. Twenty years later I pulled this sweater out of his dresser and wore it so much it drove my mom crazy. Every time I wore it, I felt his love wrap around me. It began to hold all my love, too. The fibres of this thing couldn't hold the weight of all that love, so I had to put it away so the washing machine could not shred it. There it sits, again, waiting for someone else's love.



What does it mean to hoard an empty water bottle? It is not even a nice bottle. This plastic progeny usually held in my special box of One Direction memorabilia was thrown to me from the one and only Harry Styles during a concert in 2013. My memories from that concert feel like hazy sparkles – a joy so strong it took me three days to recover. Plastic, usually so hated, brings me so much joy. All my young teenage joy is wrapped up around and filled up inside that plastic water bottle. I take care of this water bottle like it is any other of the items passed to me. I hope its future is filled with love from the little ones I am attempting to saturate with a love for Harry Styles. Or, perhaps, this is just an elaborate ruse to position Harry Styles as my relative.



I am lost in the world without my glasses (or contacts). I cannot see anything more than two feet away from me without them. I have been hoarding my own glasses for many years, and recently, I was given my Great Grandma and Great-Great Grandma's glasses. Only someone with low vision like myself would cherish the tools that helped her relatives see the world. These bionic eyes become parts of ourselves – something we literally cannot live without. We form deep relationships with the way they feel on our faces and aid in our vision. They capture the memories of our lives. I take care of all these glasses now to thank them for taking care of my grandmothers. Stored safely in cases, cleaned with special clothes, held gently to feel the weight of all they have seen.



There is a very specific feeling you get from smelling a pair of freshly made moccasins. When I received my first pair of real moccasins (pair in the front), my dad brought them up to his nose and took a big whiff. He said they smelt like his grandparent's house – like the backroom where the tanned hide hung. These moccasins have held so much life. The life of my Great-Grandmother's (pair on the right), my father's (pair on the left), and mine. They hold the life of animals who gifted themselves for us. They hold the life of the makers. They hold the community they were made in – the same community for all three pairs. They hold the legacies of colonialism too deep to get into. They hold the legacies of healing – of deep desires to reconnect. Over many years they have kept us warm and held our memories. In years to come, they will be joined by more moccasins.

	from siblings and little ones, over and over again.
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