

Hannah Turner

Cataloguing Culture  
Legacies of Colonialism in  
Museum Documentation



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# Abbreviations

ADP	Automatic Data Processing
BAE	Bureau of American Ethnology
CMS	content management system
HNAI	Handbook of North American Indians series
HRAF	Human Relation Area Files
MSC	Museum Support Center
NAGPRA	Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
NMAIA	National Museum of the American Indian Act
NMNH	National Museum of Natural History
NPS	National Parks Services
OCIO	Office of the Chief Information Officer
SIMA	Summer School in Museum Anthropology
SOA	Smithsonian Office of Anthropology
USNM	United States National Museum

# Introduction

## “The Making of Specimens Eloquent”

The making of specimens eloquent demands more than the mere objects. Besides collections, cases, cabinets, alcoves, exhibition halls, study series, dust proof drawers and constant watch care, there must be illustrations, drawings, photos, paintings, portraits, portfolios, and picture galleries. There must also be information, card catalogues, labels, reference lists, pamphlets, library, and other sources of knowledge. The public lecture, uniting the specimens, the pictures, and the label with the eloquence of the lecturer and the sympathy of many hearers, completes the story. Everyone who has the interests of the science of our species at heart sufficiently to save the material witness, will confer the greatest benefit by being sure of the data accompanying each specimen.

– Otis Mason, curator of ethnology, United States National Museum, 1906

Each Federal agency and each museum which has possession or control over holdings or collections of Native American human remains and associated funerary objects shall compile an inventory of such items and, to the extent possible based on information possessed by such museum or Federal agency, identify the geographical and cultural affiliation of such item ... The term “documentation” means a summary of existing museum or Federal agency records, including inventories or catalogues, relevant studies, or other pertinent data for the limited purpose of determining the geographical origin, cultural affiliation, and basic facts surrounding acquisition and accession of Native American human remains and associated funerary objects subject to this section.

– Excerpt from the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990

WHAT ARE THE LEGACIES of colonialism? How do colonial relations present themselves through time and in practice? This book does not present an easy answer to these questions, but it points to the material, documentary practices of ethnographic museum work as a key site in the production of continued colonial legacies. For example, alongside American legislation aimed at improving originating communities' access to their cultural heritage and facilitating repatriation requests, we find that our procedures and policies for doing so are often moored in past ideologies or epistemic loyalties. What are the material and historical practices that continue to affect current ethical considerations? Museum records are often taken to be neutral or privileged sources of knowledge, but they are both contextual and historical, as are many bureaucratic practices. As many practitioners, experts, and scholars know, to return or de-accession objects, one must investigate the documentation that was collected with the object or that was created by the institution. Repatriation work is a complex process of relationship building, advocacy, activism, fundraising, and more. It also requires a lot of "paper" work, digging into archives and museum catalogues to establish claims of ownership and "authenticity." As I will show in this book, institutional knowledge, particularly in museums, exists in the work of record keeping, data collection, and (today) digitization. This work includes naming, standardizing, classifying, and excluding, and these practices have legacies that reach far beyond the present. In this book, I suggest that the history of anthropology is also a history of paper media technologies that have co-created our understanding of the past. This study is a deep investigation into the pressing issues that arise when we address the work of documentation in museums back through time.

To do this, I take as the major case study of this book the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH),<sup>1</sup> which is where I conducted my doctoral work.<sup>2</sup> There, in the Department of Anthropology, I found a history of museum bureaucracy in ledger books, card catalogues, staff members' memories and files, and the institutional archives. As I will argue, the museum discursively constructed ethnographic specimens as it recorded and documented them. This book is a history of classification and documentation in one ethnographic museum, but it pays attention to the constitution of material-culture-as-data to historicize the collection of data about human beings more broadly. What made a "good" specimen markedly different in 1880 than it was in 1908, or 1970. In nineteenth-century North America, objects and their associated information were brought in,

recorded in ledger books, and catalogued in large indexes as data; and these documentation practices came to form fundamental concepts in anthropology and material culture studies. I make no claims that this process was or is an all-encompassing system of description. Instead, I am most intrigued when classifications cease to work and when individuals themselves encounter and resist what they see as bureaucratic inefficiencies. To study these moments requires a kind of “studying up” that turns the normalized and stable into something that is to be investigated and opened.<sup>3</sup> This approach is as much a personal philosophy as it is an academic task, one that has driven my work and brought me to study these historical cabinets and “old” media technologies in museums as prolific producers of categories about human beings that have present political and ethical importance.

When museum documentation is seen as neutral – in legal repatriation proceedings, for example, or in the US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) excerpt above – we must question what the origins of this objectivity are, where it comes from, and how it stands to last. Throughout this study, I consider how intellectual categories and ideas were established and became normalized in the study of material culture. Documentation media have not been subjected to the same criticism directed at visual media like photography or film. Yet, the collecting list, the paper register, and the card catalogue were foundational media technologies in the development of the anthropological discipline in the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they created the conditions of possibility for contemporary digital databases. The ways that ethnologists (and later, anthropologists) made use of paper and digital technologies worked to reinforce the authority and integrity of scientific colonialism. I argue that we must be attentive to the historical and grounded practices that have organized material culture as “specimens,” while at the same time remaining cognizant of the socio-political ramifications when conducting histories such as these. To understand how colonialism operates as both a productive and reductive force, it is necessary to investigate how categories were applied to material culture and became routinized through bureaucratic documentation in collecting institutions.

Early North American museum ethnologists focused on the preservation of Indigenous cultures from all over the world by collecting their belongings. At the same time, as many examples in this book will show, narratives belonging to these Indigenous communities were often excluded and considered to be unnecessary for the scientific pursuit of the study of

humankind.<sup>4</sup> In North America in particular, this was, in part, intentional: a way to claim resources and lands for colonial states. It was also unintentional or, rather, so embedded into practice that it rarely was seen for what it was. The origins of much documentation practice in museums used ancestors, belongings, and collections as the “data” of human history – and I believe this is important to consider. Histories such as these are present in almost every ethnographic museum in the world, and many other scholars and writers have covered the implications comprehensively.<sup>5</sup> For example, Marisa Elena Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis articulate an ethical stance about the need for understanding how colonialism is continually practised in information and heritage institutions:

For at least half a century, catalogers have struggled with how to catalog and classify Native American and Indigenous peoples’ materials in library, archive, and museum collections. Understanding how colonialism works can help those in the field of knowledge organization appreciate the power dynamics embedded in the marginalization of Native American and Indigenous peoples’ materials through standardization, misnaming, and other practices. The decolonizing methodology of imagining provides one way that knowledge organization practitioners and theorists can acknowledge and discern the possibilities of Indigenous community-based approaches to the development of alternative information structures.<sup>6</sup>

For Duarte and Belarde-Lewis, decolonization is a process by which Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars can imagine new realities, ontologies, practices. As they suggest, naming is one of the key ways in which colonialism and white superiority continue to be oppressive for Native American and Indigenous peoples. Other ways that the subjugation of Native knowledge systems is practised are in the delinking of knowledges from greater ontological systems and in the persistent idea that, if we change any of the ways we classify and standardize something, we are uprooting some kind of moral order handed down from on high.<sup>7</sup> We need to recognize that, “in the everyday sense, the power to name is a way of organizing, of itemizing, of making information and knowledge accessible to both a specific and imaginary constituent audience.”<sup>8</sup>

As a white settler scholar, rather than attempting to reproduce Indigenous knowledges, histories, or stories, I turn my attention to the information practices that enabled particular epistemologies to be taken “as is” and remain

durable in the history of anthropology and museums. In doing so, I do look at records and objects that may have been taken from communities without their consent. I remain cognizant that there are other, important ways to tell stories regarding ancestors and belongings, and that for the longest part of the history of the disciplines, the theories and histories of anthropology were created in a top-down fashion by white male scholars (although there are important exceptions to this generalization).<sup>9</sup> Yet, as Margaret Bruchac recounts skilfully in her book *Savage Kin*, early Native informants were actively managing early ethnologists and anthropologists, and even mitigating potential harm.<sup>10</sup> She argues for us to make the “Indigenous intellectual and social contributions to the foundational knowledges of anthropology far more visible.”<sup>11</sup> What I work to show is how museum documentation, as an embedded institutional practice, helped cement narratives that have assisted in erasing, or at least hiding, those subaltern narratives brought to the fore in works like Bruchac’s.

The subtitle of this book – *Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation* – connotes how these long-standing and pervasive ideologies are still at work today. One of my concerns is the idea of “legacy data,” a term used for information attached to museum objects in their records. This information includes names, places, and stories that collectors and museum workers assigned to objects in the past. The term is also a provocation to think critically about how documentation embeds certain narratives and occludes others. Data (big or small) are historical and are variously valued, and, as I have found, they can be both “dirty” and “clean.” Principally, the word “data” usually carries with it an assumption of veracity and reverence for the possibilities of impartial, omniscient technologies. Yet the ways in which we craft knowledge from “data” are not impartial, and it is incorrect to assume that data repositories are detached from their histories. As Daniel Rosenberg has argued, the theoretical underpinnings of “data” can be traced to the seventeenth century. The term was linked to ideas about argumentation and knowledge, as it was recognized that the accumulation of data could make the unknown known.<sup>12</sup> “Data,” Rosenberg writes, “has no truth.”<sup>13</sup> Such assumptions about data are based on similar concepts about the objectivity of facts and truth in the sciences. Yet data are constructed and are historical; they are not transparent or self-evident.<sup>14</sup> We need to interrogate the histories of “raw” data across times, geographies, and circumstances, asking how different disciplines have imagined or crafted their objects and evidence.<sup>15</sup>

This book raises two key ideas: first, that the origins of media technologies used to catalogue humanity are an under-examined yet crucial history; and second, that contemporary claims to knowledge authority in cultural or memory institutions are built upon the standards that have organized the remains and material objects of North American Indigenous communities. Documents – what Annelise Riles has called “the artifacts of modern knowledge” – shaped the development of anthropology but also our relationship to understanding history and human beings.<sup>16</sup> As material culture became data in the museum and was mined as a resource for scientific knowledge extraction, the legacy of past practice and epistemology was written into documentation as categories, naming conventions, incorrect tribal affiliations, and more. As communities reclaim their heritage, and museum staff accommodate this reclaiming, both encounter these documentary traces of imperialism that continue to frame the legal and ethical approaches to repatriation requests.<sup>17</sup>

What, then, is the history of museum data? The first epigraph at the beginning of this introduction was taken from the annual report of Otis Tufton Mason, who was the curator of ethnology at the Smithsonian’s United States National Museum (USNM; now the NMNH) from 1884 to 1908. This excerpt, among many others in his annual reports over his tenure, is about the systematic data-centred approach to the burgeoning field of anthropology. Legitimizing anthropology as a true science, Mason argued, required the objects of science. In a kind of agential-realist intellectual manoeuvre,<sup>18</sup> it required crafting and manipulating a series of technologies and practices that have come not only to define the field but also to form a general approach to creating knowledge from what he saw as “material witnesses.” The second excerpt is from American repatriation legislation known as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, passed into law in the United States in 1990. Although the discipline of anthropology has changed significantly since 1884, there are concerning similarities between the kinds of claims made in Otis Mason’s statement and those made in the NAGPRA. Both contain inherent assumptions: first, that the museum is the authoritative source of information about these objects and, in many cases, human remains; and, second, that this authority is produced by regulated and, to some extent, standardized systems.<sup>19</sup> These similarities, despite the intervening century, stimulated my interest into the mundane and routine aspects of knowledge work in museums and anthropology, and how data inherit the ideologies and legacies of colonialism.

In the mid-nineteenth century, naturalists and government employees were interested in collecting the material culture of Indigenous peoples in North America. Through a variety of methods, objects were bought, sold, and taken from communities that were actively engaging in complex cultural exchanges. The USNM was an official government collection of all kinds of items – biological, paleontological, geological, and ethnological. The goal of the museum was the creation of large “data” sets of all life, and it guided the collection of material culture from all over the world to aid in this endeavour. The Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) was established as part of the USNM in 1879, and the Anthropology Division was officially created within the USNM in 1883. This began the bureaucratic and data-rich life of material culture collections, and the legacies of colonial naming conventions, terminologies, and methodologies devised at that time still impact how these collections are used today. The use of seemingly mundane recording technologies worked to reinforce the authority of the Smithsonian Institution as the source of information about objects and histories. Revealing how anthropology has created, classified, and catalogued its objects opens up these histories in a new way.

### **Anthropological Classification and Museum Objectivities**

In 1966, the social anthropologist Mary Douglas published the book that would make her well known – *Purity and Danger*. This was a detailed discussion on holiness, supported by her understanding of the Christian faith, her fieldwork, and other anthropological examples. As she says, “Dirt is matter out of place. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”<sup>20</sup> In her book she compares “Western” ritual habits around holiness to those of smaller “primitive” cultural groups, as a way to denormalize the practices and beliefs of her contemporaries in the academy and “Western” society. She does this by comparing different systems of ritual food avoidance and taboo, but her book is more than an understanding of why Christians, Jews, and the Nuer avoid particular foods. She theorized a world full of classifications – one where anomalies, outsiders, monsters were necessary parts of the “system.” She showed how naming affects our entire understanding of things, how we place ourselves in hierarchies that

are relative, not absolute. “Holiness” implies cleanliness, and, beyond the old adage linking the two, Douglas argues that this connection is essential for understanding how we make sense of the world. Her thesis on dirt and purity was simple: that our ideas of what fits and what does not build our worlds. Douglas was working within a paradigm of colonial anthropology, something we must not forget. But her work laid the foundation for a serious and investigative study of categories as relative things, arguing that what counts as “discordant” and “taboo” is a complex aspect of how things are named communally. As she writes, “Ambiguous [things] tend to be treated as if they harmonized with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected. If they are accepted, the structure of assumptions has to be modified. As learning proceeds, objects are named. Their names then affect the way they are perceived next time: once labelled they are more speedily slotted into pigeon-holes in the future.”<sup>21</sup> One of her most salient conclusions was that “Western” society is not at the top of a hierarchy of classification where everything has its own place. She argued instead that every society has complex, and not purely logical, characterizations of what “counts” as an object in a pattern. Her work was important because it directly questioned the long-held belief that permeated many disciplines at the time: Western assumptions of order were superior to all else.

European science was a specific kind of science, characterized by an orientation toward finding global truths derived from natural historical descriptions.<sup>22</sup> As the museum scholar Tony Bennett argues, classification represented a new condition of possibility and a new kind of evidence: that of difference.<sup>23</sup> Classificatory tables, hierarchies, and arrangements based on visual characteristics are all indicative of what has been called a Classical episteme, where these modes of ordering presented “simplified, yet utterly verifiable knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Mary Louise Pratt has argued that the “natural history approach” to the study of human beings and their material culture was made possible by developments in the classification of natural history specimens that originated with the publication of Linnaeus’s “*Systema Natura*” in 1735. Indeed, as Pratt notes, Europe’s first major international scientific expedition was to determine (once and for all) the shape of the earth. The “descriptive apparatus of natural history,” as Pratt calls it, defined the approach to gathering information on this expedition, and future ones like it. This apparatus made it possible to document the encounters with the world that early European travellers faced, and to create a kind of order from chaos through classification.<sup>25</sup>

Kevin Hetherington, echoing Michel Foucault, has argued that relationships of similitude were key ordering devices used by museums in the nineteenth century, and the use of the classificatory table presupposed a different “gaze,” which constructed an entirely different subject. Rather than being opposites, similitude and difference enabled early ethnologists both to group objects collected from the field that shared similar characteristics and to establish series of these objects based on their differences.<sup>26</sup> These differences were often based on functional characteristics that were assessed visually. The process of linking objects within larger series of evolutionary progress is often called the typological tradition. Preceded by archaeological work that created grand typologies of artifacts to understand the temporal relationships of objects found in the ground, typological arrangements make visible an evolutionary scheme through an object-centred pedagogy. The “type specimen” in botany, for example, was considered by natural historians and scientists to be representative of an entire class or group of specimens, and was carefully constructed to emphasize the average traits of the object.<sup>27</sup> This tradition was made explicitly visible in museum displays of anthropological collections. An early example of this is Pitt Rivers and his organizational attitude to collections in the museum in Oxford that bears his name.

As part of what David Jenkins calls an “emerging ethos of scientific reality,” this evolutionary paradigm is diametrically opposed to earlier modes of organization in early *wunderkammern*, or “cabinets of curiosity,” whose displays emphasized the unique or monstrous objects collected during travels.<sup>28</sup> Objects were no longer, to borrow Mary Douglas’s term, “deviant” monstrosities, but had transformed into suitable specimens and objects of evidence by being aligned in a legible series or a logical progression. Tony Bennett has argued that this shift allowed museum objects to perform a new function as observable phenomena to be studied by science, and to circulate between collections and among museums.<sup>29</sup> Thinking of objects as evidence enabled a survey of the historical and social processes in the study of humankind’s evolution. The foundations and developments of natural history thus made it possible (and plausible) to examine the natural state of humanity itself. A new field of visibility was created, and the methods of observing the natural world provided the key to understanding its wonders and minimizing its chaos.<sup>30</sup> Order, as Foucault writes, was a model of rationality.<sup>31</sup>

The use of the Linnaean system had clear and measurable effects on the study of people in the context of natural history, and, as Pratt notes, the

system “epitomized the continental, transnational aspirations of European science.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, early anthropological investigations formed hypotheses about the world in this context, with the Linnaean classification system acting as a rubric that allowed scholars to structure their findings, not just about plants, but about humankind as well. As Pratt notes, this approach was reflected in Linnaeus’s work: “Linnaeus posited among the quadrupeds a single category homo ... and drew a single distinction between homo sapiens and homo monstrous.”<sup>33</sup> Within the context of Linnaean classification, any form that falls outside of the internal logic is considered a singularity.<sup>34</sup> As the principle of evolution was popularized, however, the distinction between the monstrous and normal became a trivial one – the outliers, or “freaks,” became the “missing links.”<sup>35</sup>

Early naturalists therefore often presented objects as pieces of evidence that became key components in telling the story of science, progress, and “man.”<sup>36</sup> Further, objects collected from colonies were important because of the primacy of visual instruction. Tony Bennett argues that “eye-knowledge arose from the distinctive epistemological concerns of the historical sciences in their claims to be able to decipher the meanings of objects and, thereby, to challenge the text-based narratives of biblical and humanistic scholarship.”<sup>37</sup> The reliance on visual pedagogies, or “ocularcentrism,” and the quest for objectivity in the sciences, influenced anthropological approaches to understanding culture. This way, as Bennett argues, “the whole of the material world could be lined up and placed before the eyes in a manner which allowed each display to tell its own story, seemingly without the need for textual mediation.”<sup>38</sup> This offered a way to represent the progress from savage to barbarian to “civilian,” enabling ethnological displays to validate the utopian ideals of nineteenth-century elites above all else.<sup>39</sup> This image of utopia ultimately saw a future where the disappearance of Indigenous populations was imminent.

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have sought to understand how visual modes of thought or metaphysical and epistemological realities come into being. They argue that there have been several modes of seeing in the sciences and that this variety has had an effect on how knowledge is created and how science is “done.”<sup>40</sup> They trace the development of three modes of “objectivity”: truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgment. Daston and Galison make the case that objectivity, or knowing the world through seeing, is a cultivated practice, one that has shaped the practice of scientific observation. They examine scientific atlases and catalogues

as visual evidence, and sites of epistemics and “ethos,” where visual habits are “also expressions of epistemological loyalties.”<sup>41</sup> The creation of a scientific image, they argue, is the creation of a scientific self. As objective observation thus became the dominant empiricism of the sciences, the articulation of the set of practices that involved the collection of type specimens in the sciences “reconciled scientific memory and amnesia.”<sup>42</sup>

Above all, objects could be made to stand in for, represent, or replace the human objects of inquiry, either visually or physically, and, thus, museum displays made ideal educational tools. This use of objects resulted in a strategic approach to collecting material culture, particularly in North America. In the United States from 1860 until 1900 – what has been called the Museum Period<sup>43</sup> – a pervasive approach to understanding “other” cultures developed and was institutionalized through museum collecting and cataloguing practices. The theoretical positions of early ethnologists were strongly empirical and retained the natural historical approaches of training within the biological and geological sciences. The first curators and cataloguers in museums were trained as naturalists but operated as amateur ethnologists.<sup>44</sup> For example, Frederick Ward Putnam, in his association with the Harvard Peabody Museum, was trained within a particular kind of evidentiary regime, bringing to early anthropology a “respect for data as evidenced by authenticated collections.”<sup>45</sup> The “data” of ethnological research were situated in the “field” and manifested as documents (field notes, observations) and museum collections.

Fifty years of scholarship have considered the history of anthropology as a history of colonialism. James Clifford and George Marcus proposed a language of postcolonial and reflexive critique from which the discipline of anthropology has emerged. Serious engagements with the construction of culture through the academic inscription and “writing” of it have since abounded.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the view of museums as non-neutral knowledge institutions has received critical scholarly attention since at least the 1970s, and decades of postcolonial research and activism on the part of Indigenous communities have reconstructed the museum as a site of harm, contestation, contact, cultural negotiation, and potential healing.<sup>47</sup> The history of anthropology in North America is also closely tied to the development of collections in museums,<sup>48</sup> and the intellectual categories crafted by colonialism and used to exclude communities and people have been criticized for some time. Yet little work has addressed how the epistemic loyalties of colonial collecting practices became embedded into the everyday practices

of institutions. As Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star have done,<sup>49</sup> I bring attention to the ways in which classification can be used to discriminate, and I plot the historical underpinnings of systems of categorization. It is my goal to show that ideas about evidence are historically situated and arose out of the communities and techniques of scientific-ethnological practice in the long nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup>

Many of these ideas are influenced and exemplified by recent work in media history and information studies.<sup>51</sup> These fields have broadly called us to pay attention to the infrastructures of knowledge production that influence a collective understanding of data-as-knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Alex Wright's and Markus Krajewski's recent works on organizational devices and card catalogues constitute important histories of technology and information.<sup>53</sup> Where Wright and Krajewski plot the origins of card catalogues in the library sciences, this book bridges these media histories with the history of anthropology and the development of paper organizational systems. Critiques of the history of colonialism and media have also focused on the representation of peoples and cultures through vision – namely, through display and photography.<sup>54</sup> Brian Hochman's recent work on the history of anthropological recording technologies, such as the phonograph, evaluates the history of visual and audio recording technologies alongside the history of early ethnology. It stands as an example of how media technologies and anthropology have influenced one another.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Rebecca Lemov examines a “lost” archive of punch cards at the Library of Congress. She found that these “little tools” of knowledge were used by twentieth-century cognitive anthropologists to record the dreams of Indigenous interviewees.<sup>56</sup> Here, I look more closely at the kinds of documents, ledgers, forms, and lists used to record material culture during a similar time period. Lastly, research and writing in postcolonial, feminist science studies have brought to media studies and history a grounded politics that seeks to upset what we see as normalized and routine. Scholars have also productively raised the notion of seeing museums and the study of material culture as a key development in the history of Western and colonial anthropology, and I build upon their critique. As I argue throughout this book, how we make knowledge relies on a complex system of individuals, technologies, and technical skill – all of which are compounded in the way documents are created and circulated.

As an information studies and museum studies scholar, I am interested in describing the legacy of how colonial thought can become stabilized in material technologies and practices – what has been called “material durability.”

Theorized much earlier by sociologists of science such as John Law, Michel Callon, and Bruno Latour, the concept of material durability has encouraged me to look into the small iterative ways that forms and epistemologies can remain stable despite their ability to disappear into the woodwork – or, if you like, cabinetry. “Durability” typically connotes objects that have material force, things that can be touched and pushed against. Relations can be made “durable” when they become embedded in “inanimate materials” such as buildings or texts.<sup>57</sup> Put another way, social arrangements maintain their network relationship longer when they are made outside of the relation itself, when they are made physical.<sup>58</sup> The concept of discursive stability is also useful in understanding the way relations are made “durable.” Discourses can come to have lasting effect in both physical environments and within practices: the work of individuals and their relations, that “hold together” in, for example, an organization. Through a Foucauldian lens, Law argues that certain ways of ordering are made also possible by certain discourses – the discourse sets the limits and the conditions of what is possible.<sup>59</sup> Yet this reading of durable materials and discourses is complex. As Law explains, the walls of a prison are only as durable as the guards who watch them and the bureaucracies that order the relations between the guards and the prisoners, and indeed the relations between durable materials change depending on their location within a network, or their adoption into a new one.<sup>60</sup> In her recent work, Ann Stoler has taken the concept of durability or duress as a capacity of colonial or imperial ideations to endure, to hold out and last, despite shape-shifting in form.<sup>61</sup> For Stoler, imperial forms maintain a kind of legacy – which she calls “presence” – where the logics of imperialism continue to frame contemporary encounters. Looking at colonialism and temporality, as Stoler suggests, calls us to question how an ideology (or set of embedded practices) can remain materially durable. Effectively, I am interested in the small details and specifics of how colonial legacies present themselves in documentation technologies.

The idea that cataloguing is as much a practice as it is a set of rules is not new; given this idea, we can see cataloguing as a performative knowledge process.<sup>62</sup> As Annemarie Mol teaches us, such a conceptual starting point supposes that multiple realities are practised, or “done,” and that they are situated not in the realm of philosophy but in everyday, routinized work.<sup>63</sup> Mol’s research was fundamental in examining the daily work of nurse practitioners to understand how diagnosis is negotiated between patients and medical professionals. As she argues, the action of this work is a kind of

performance enactment or performativity that is heterogeneous – that different lived realities are practised differently.<sup>64</sup> As Clare Waterton has recently argued of archives, performance is something “done,” whereby “objects and categories are only really present in ‘the doing of them,’ [and] they have to be continually performed to exist at all.”<sup>65</sup> The doing of the work, the creation of routine, and the focus in this book on the practices of cataloguing are therefore all relevant.<sup>66</sup> Put simply, performativity is the way in which things change and are enacted in practice. These performances become naturalized, and the distinctions, politics, and genders enacted within often hide the political nature of actions.<sup>67</sup>

I build on this critical scholarship to consider the formulation of ethnological categories and classifications from a perspective that seeks to destabilize existing normative claims to evidence and objectivity. Throughout this book, I use the term “material durability” to refer to a feature of what can be called the “information infrastructure” of the anthropology catalogue at the NMNH. I argue that, despite decades of postcolonial research and revision, object names and classification terms seem to stick to existing object records, which were situated in the natural historical sciences of the nineteenth century. I also suggest that structured museum bureaucracies arose from the routine socio-technological practices of the everyday work of organizing, classifying, and cataloguing; and this process can impact Indigenous peoples’ abilities to access and to ensure the return of their cultural heritage today. Through this study, I hope to raise essential questions for anthropologists, museum historians, and media scholars: How have we constructed the “data” of material culture? Also, for whom does this process matter, and why?

## Outline of Chapters

Understanding the collecting of objects and anthropological data in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depends on understanding the practice of collecting more broadly. In the context of this book, it also means recognizing that the Smithsonian and its museums were, and are, an arm of the American federal government. The Smithsonian was established in 1846. At the time, the practice of science, particularly natural history collecting, was well established. However, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, there was little in the way of standards of practice when it came to collecting objects – indeed, they often arrived at an institution haphazardly

or from pre-existing personal collections. At mid-century, a number of collecting expeditions and world's fairs resulted in a mass of objects from military men and budding ethnologists that came into museums, including the Smithsonian, in piles. Objects would enter a collection in boxes, often with little or no contextual information. At the Smithsonian, they were then recorded in large ledger books, which contained fields to guide the recording of ethnological information, but these fields were directly copied from those in other departments – for example, minerals, zoological objects, and ethnological artifacts and human remains were catalogued using the same documentation fields as these other departments to describe each object. When records were computerized at the Smithsonian in the 1960s, they made use of the same terms and ideologies from a century earlier, while data took on new meanings and values. The chapters that follow take these media technologies and paper documentation tools as their objects of analysis. They are organized around the technologies that have framed the study of material culture: the field recording list, the ledger book, the card catalogue, the computerized inventory, and the database.

Chapter 1, “Writing Desiderata: Defining Evidence in the Field,” demonstrates how, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Smithsonian Institution worked to establish the very objectivities and categories by which we measure “human-made” things. Establishing normative claims to evidence was done through the collection of “field data,” a term transported from other sciences to ethnography. “Desiderata” were lists published in Smithsonian scientific correspondence – field guides and circulars – sent throughout North America and the world. These documents and lists specified the kinds of things that were seen to be “useful” to the burgeoning scientific practice of ethnology.<sup>68</sup> This chapter plots the development of the “science” of ethnology from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, arguing that paper documents and circular lists were foundational technologies that helped craft contemporary objectivities around the study of the past. I show how the epistemic loyalties have changed through time, depending on what was desired, and when. I bring attention to how objects and information about people became evidence in the language of science at the time through the use of documentary tools. Staff made collections useful by connecting the documentation to the object through good, bureaucratic record-keeping systems. As a result of invitations for the collection of objects published in circulars, the Smithsonian received at least hundreds of specimens. The collecting guides detailed in this chapter are

important examples of how non-specialists and scientists envisioned what a best practice of museum collecting might be at the time. The guides made it possible for collectors who were non-experts in the field to work on behalf of the Smithsonian, acquire the desired objects, and preserve them at a scientific standard that the museum saw fit. As is evidenced in the rhetoric of these early circulars, without basic documentation, objects were of little or no research value. Objects that were collected in the field were documented and catalogued; through this process, they became scientifically meaningful and formed the basis of future ethnological research. Further, the circulars mirrored or explicitly used methodologies for collecting natural history specimens in the field. As a result, objects were crafted as “well-authenticated,” scientifically sound specimens. The collecting guides give voice to the epistemic concerns of natural history, and the classificatory and ocularcentric gazes. The “descriptive apparatus” of natural history foregrounds the Smithsonian’s approach to collecting in the mid-nineteenth century, as evidenced by the kinds of description and data collection proposed in the field guides.

The second chapter, “On the Margins: Paper Systems of Classification,” examines the ledger books used to record objects once they were in the museum. I consider these as paper technologies and highly idealized media forms; they were ideal “blanks” that established the institution’s authority, and staff recorded data in them after the objects were brought in and unpacked.<sup>69</sup> The practice of writing objects down in these registration lists allowed them to be legible within the institution and across departments as specimens. These ledgers are not free from human error, yet, as this chapter shows, current museum work, including repatriation claims, often relies on the information recorded in them. In this chapter, I look to the specific collection and catalogue made by Timothy Dixon Bolles, the collector of what is known as the Hoonah Repatriation Collection in the Smithsonian. By tracing some of the history of this collection, I elucidate how recording information validated field data, objects, and individuals within the construct of nineteenth-century science as a metric of knowledge. This collection serves as an example of how “field data” became museum data, how objects became specimens within the museum. I also show how this process was an embodied, performative practice. My analysis of the documentation takes into account materiality – the labels and fields denoted, the space allotments for each piece of information, and the frequency with which

these standard categories were applied and used. Listing objects in ledger books also allowed museum researchers to keep track of the circulation of objects through specimen exchange, where similar-looking objects were considered duplicates and transferred out of the museum.<sup>70</sup> Reading these ledgers also exposes tensions between the ideals of data and object collection and the practicalities of the mundane work of record keeping. The large, bound ledger books reveal the limitations of the application of a scientific, natural-historical approach to collecting and recording information about objects, and the ledgers take on another, more fluid, documentary role as pictures and images fill their pages. What I hope readers understand from this chapter is that the affordances and constraints of the media technologies the museum used to record object collections affected, in no small part, how those objects were listed, classified, renamed, and reimagined.

These themes continue in the third chapter, “Ordering Devices and Indian Files: Cataloguing Ethnographic Specimens,” which takes a broader view of a later recording technology: the card catalogue. I examine the card catalogue and how it was used in the context of early ethnological practice from the late 1800s to the mid-twentieth century. I look briefly outside the Smithsonian to similar developments across European and other North American museums at this time to plot the first tracks of a much larger history in the development of recording material culture. Seen in Europe and in libraries by one of the Smithsonian’s curators, Otis Mason, the card catalogue was brought into the Department of Anthropology as a tool for creating a universal index of all human material culture. I see the development and adoption of the card catalogue as an organizing technology, and suggest that this method and its material affordances worked to stabilize the ideas, forms, and nomenclatures that had been variously and non-systematically applied in ethnological work until this time. This chapter furthers the argument for a practice-oriented model of documentation and media history by analyzing the practice of cataloguing. At various points, cataloguing was characterized as “deadwork,” reflecting its mundane and boring aspects and its practice by largely untrained workers. Once objects came into the museum, they were haphazardly unpacked and sorted, based entirely on the desires of curators (or who was in the building at the time), non-specialist collectors’ notes, and administrative staff (mostly women unnamed in the archives). Those responsible for describing objects often fell victim to normal and uniquely human constraints – boredom and mistake

making. I interrogate this entire process to bring attention to the human ways in which data become a practice, and how this practice is at the heart of much socio-technical phenomena.

Chapter 4, “Pragmatic Classification: The Routine Work of Description after 1950,” looks specifically at routine just after mid-century and bridges the long history of the institution with the moment just before records were computerized in the late 1960s. I use the example of a curator at the time, William Sturtevant, who was, like Otis Mason, obsessed with order and chaos in the collections documentation. His attitudes represented an approach to documentation that was changing, as new standards and new methods in anthropology developed. In 1969, Sturtevant wrote a new field guide for collecting ethnographic specimens, which sought to identify “good” specimens in a new context. This guide can still be found in the drawers of the Anthropology Department staff, and it holds its own epistemic loyalties – some of which I disentangle in this chapter. I also investigate the emergence of museum data standards, connecting the legacies of classification with the pragmatic needs of a growing and modernizing bureaucracy. Using information from informal and formal archives and interviews with staff, I try to make evident the work procedures through which museum staff codified material culture during this time. The first computerized inventory systems required standardization to function; yet the adoption of such standardization is far from neutral data management. Computerized systems, like the card catalogues and ledgers before them, were not just simple pragmatic tools for classification: they encoded values, norms, and ideologies from long ago.

The fifth chapter, “Object, Specimen, Data: Computerization and the Legacy of Dirty Data,” looks at the development of the computerized index of material culture in the Smithsonian, nearly eighty years after the establishment of the card catalogue had become the primary source of information about the collection. It examines the phenomenon of “bad” or “dirty” data – that is, words, phrases, categories, or descriptions about cultural heritage that do not fit into predefined standards, and that may be outdated, incorrect, racist, or harmful. This chapter tells the story of the practice of documentation, turning the lens on the key individuals at the Smithsonian who were responsible for routinizing the practice of description. This chapter argues that, as computerization increased the importance of standardized nomenclatures in documentation, it also embedded these standardized terms into technologies that are still being used to track, view, and exhibit objects in the NMNH. The continual reproduction of information into

different media over time often resulted in changes in the amount and accuracy of information. At the same time, information was durable because it was continually replicated. I argue that the catalogue is a performative informational space. From one vantage point, catalogues become the machines of the thought processes: they are the mechanized and routinized material effects of the organization of knowledge. From another, it is possible to see the inherent tension between stability and change, or durability and performativity, as a core characteristic of the history of record keeping at the Smithsonian.

This chapter also examines the authority of the catalogue and associated records as bureaucratic documents in the context of repatriation legislation in the United States. In order to repatriate cultural materials from museums, Indigenous communities and museum staff rely on the documentation associated with each object. Every small decision, every revision, and even every mistake in the documentation can have major ramifications for the future of these objects. I demonstrate how the epistemological commitment to pragmatism and dealing “practically” with collections, and the nature of the system itself to impose one kind of ordering logic, has often occluded a more nuanced ethical approach to the management of the information about objects. Thinking about the history of museum documentation allows us to understand the phenomenon of strange, dirty, and bad data – why such data would need to be “cleaned,” and what that need says about the value systems that circulate in bureaucracies built on colonial ideas about human beings and their material culture.

The conclusion, “A Museum Data Legacy for the Future,” focuses on the need to be more critical of and attentive to the power relations that become embedded in museum work and that are then crafted by technologies. I reinforce the main claim of this book, that documentation media are not neutral forms but can reinscribe colonial narratives into current practice. Looking within anthropology and museum work, we find a history of bureaucracy and oppression that foregrounds not *why* intellectual colonialism happens but *how* it becomes ingrained in institutions.

### **A Note on Methodology: Researching in an Anthropology Department**

In November 2013, I was sitting in the main lobby of the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, watching a performance, by a

group of Tlingit dancers, of a Tlingit Killer Whale Clan Crest hat, *Kéet S'aaxw*, which included the original hat and its almost identical copy. The dancers had been invited to perform their dance because one of these hats – a replica of the original *Kéet S'aaxw* that was made in the community more than a hundred years ago – was to be put on display with the opening of the Q?rious gallery, a new educational section of the NMNH.<sup>71</sup> The replica was made in 2012, well after the original hat had been returned to its community through the repatriation process under the 1989 NMAI act. It was created using a process of laser scanning and computer-guided milling of wood, along with painting and affixing skins and hair,<sup>72</sup> and represented a collaboration between the Digitization Program Office, the Repatriation Office, and members of the Tlingit community. This project demonstrated that museums could retain objects in some forms while repatriating the originals to their communities of origin. As the two hats were danced, they moved together and separately through the crowded room. This performance confirmed the necessity for the Tlingit people to have their original hat back and in use; but it also demonstrated the potential value in having a scanned and digitally carved replica for the education of visitors about the role that objects and repatriation play in museums.

At the same time, the Smithsonian's Repatriation Office was working to digitize a group of objects from another Tlingit collection – known as the Hoonah Repatriation Collection – which had been returned to its clan in October 2013.<sup>73</sup> The collection of fifty-three shamanic funerary objects had been repatriated, but then lent by the Hoonah Indian Association back to the Smithsonian to be utilized in a unique collaboration. As part of this project, the objects were scanned and then printed using a 3D printer at the Smithsonian Institution Exhibits, a massive warehouse storing and preparing materials for in-house and travelling exhibits. This repatriation project is only one example among hundreds where Indigenous communities, in both Canada and in the United States, have fought hard to retrieve objects and belongings kept in museums all over the world. When I first witnessed how the *Kéet S'aaxw* and Hoonah collections were digitized, returned, replicated, and reproduced, it made me question how technologies are used to document cultural heritage in particular ways. Such projects, and the use of these technologies, are not always only about returning objects; they are also about exploring new relationships between museums and first peoples globally, where the rights and privileges previously taken by museums *ipso facto* are themselves returned.

As the Repatriation Office and the Hoonah Indian Association work toward addressing new ways of documenting and, in some cases, digitally reproducing the Hoonah collection,<sup>74</sup> they encountered the legacy data compiled in the early museum registers from the old, and sometimes incorrect, tags accompanying objects and the outdated terminologies used to describe them. The Hoonah collection ranges from expertly carved rattles and large woven hats to small, intricately designed and carved bone fragments. The collection, its repatriation, and future collaborations between the Hoonah Indian Association and the Smithsonian are what made the case compelling and important to consider. The objects were collected in 1884 for the Smithsonian by a US Navy lieutenant, at a time when Alaska was a United States territory and when the collecting and cataloguing practices of the museum had begun to take shape as a formal museum practice. At the time, research was conducted on museum collections under the care of the curator of ethnology Otis Mason, and a small group of staff. Crafted by the paradigms and practices of Mason and his predecessors, this small collection of objects from Alaska was compiled, recorded, named, and labelled as evidence. Reading object histories, such as those in this collection, through their associated documentation gives us insights into the contemporary practices of museum registration and cataloguing. These histories begin to explain why, despite the radical shifts in museum practices since 1884, researchers in the Smithsonian today continually encounter problems made durable by documentation practices that are over a century old.

I originally came to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History to conduct mostly archival research as I pursued my doctoral work. I was curious about museums and data ethics, particularly about the ways that museums of anthropology or ethnology could use and reuse their existing collections information to repair or redress their colonial histories and repatriate belongings. I wanted to know how online databases structured knowledge, whether it would be possible to design new systems that respected other ways of knowing, and, if so, what that might look like. When I came to the Department of Anthropology to interview staff, observe practices, and sort through cataloguing records, I found that the history of how we come to use particular anthropological definitions and classifications in museum work was incredibly rich, but had yet to be written. And so, I changed course to look at the forms and affordances of historical and contemporary organizational technologies in the museum, a bigger task than I originally imagined.

The Smithsonian Institution includes nineteen museums and galleries (and the National Zoo), and the way collections documentation is handled and administered differs vastly from one museum to another. Still, there are centralized resources to address the concerns of all of these separate entities. The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) deals specifically with the management and oversight of the information technology network and physical infrastructure that support access to collections, the staff intranet, all specific collections databases, web-based media used in the galleries, and the entire strategic plan for information management at the Smithsonian. Each individual museum has its own technology department as well. At the NMNH, this is known as the NMNH Information Technology Office (ITO), which has four branches: Informatics, Operations, Photography, and Web. Working with the Smithsonian's OCIO, the NMNH ITO manages local issues at the NMNH and communicates needs and issues to the OCIO. The NMNH has seven different scientific departments: Anthropology, Botany, Entomology, Invertebrate Zoology, Mineral Sciences, Paleobiology, and Vertebrate Zoology. In addition, there are a variety of other offices and departments, including Smithsonian Institution Exhibits and the Global Genome Initiative. In total, the NMNH holds the records for more than 146 million objects.<sup>75</sup> Every department makes use of its own version of the collections database, yet the collections management practices and fields assigned for records for each department vary significantly.<sup>76</sup> Many of the scientific departments use global databases for their specimens and research data, in addition to the NMNH's localized resources. Generally referred to as the Research and Collection Information System, the collections' images and textual records are maintained using the commercial software program of Axiell's collection management program, EMu.<sup>77</sup> In 2012, EMu held over 5.51 million records, and 756,719 digital images were held in the Digital Asset Management System, or DAMS.<sup>78</sup> In the anthropology department, EMu was successfully implemented in August 2003, with the migration of more than 500,000 catalogue records from the previous system, INQUIRE.

The Department of Anthropology, established as one of the three main departments of the United States National Museum between 1897 and 1898, with William Henry Holmes as head,<sup>79</sup> today consists of several distinct divisions (many of which have changed through time, as I will elaborate): Central Services; Collections Management and Conservation; the National

Anthropological Archives and Human Studies Film Archive; the Powell Library of Anthropology; separate Divisions of Archaeology, Ethnology, and Physical Anthropology (all of which include curators); and the Repatriation Office. Collections Management and Conservation manages the collections at the off-site collections storehouse facility, the Museum Support Center (MSC) in Suitland, Maryland. There, the collections (for all other departments as well) are held in large storerooms called pods, and the conservation, registration, and cataloguing of these collections, as well as any overall collections visits, take place there. The department catalogues each object (or small box or lot) with its own number and record. Research on collections is conducted at the MSC; for example, any curator or researcher wishing to understand the history of a specific object can access the original card catalogue file as well as the volumes of ledger books in a small room in the Collections Management Office at the MSC. As a visiting research fellow there, I witnessed staff consistently use these resources as part of their daily tasks, and today these tasks are often completed using the digitized versions online. EMu, the current collections documentation system, is accessible on the local network to each collections staff member, and is administered for the department by a data manager. As EMu was modified for the needs of each specific department, the data manager in the Department of Anthropology is tasked with managing the curatorial and collections staff needs for the use of the system, ensuring the use of standard index terms, adding new terms, and corresponding with the software team. In sum, the care of collections at the Smithsonian is a practice distributed across many different departments and centralized offices, yet the daily work of modifying records and inputting information in the Anthropology Department is done by a small group of collections management staff.

Much of the research underpinning this book relies on formal and informal archival research. Months spent in the cataloguing rooms of the Department of Anthropology, the Smithsonian Institution Archives, and the National Anthropological Archives yielded hundreds of documents that show a long institutional history. I also relied on the informal and professional archives of staff, as well as interviews with some staff, to understand this history in the context of recent efforts. The Smithsonian is an overwhelmingly large institution; these archival sources produced a wealth of documents, but there is much more detail to be found. Connecting archival material, scraps of paper, and staff member's notes and memories was not

an easy task, and, as every researcher does, I brought my own subjectivities to this history. In particular, I was concerned with how knowledge was excluded, and my selection of documents and evidence privileges these ideas. For any future researchers in these archives, I expect there are many more details to be found within.

## Museums, Bureaucracy, Colonialism

What lies within these pages can be seen as an answer to a question proposed over twenty years ago by Kenneth Dauber, in his essay on bureaucracy and ethnography. He suggests, as I do in these pages, that it is to “seemingly mundane technologies – files, charts, and records – that we should turn in grasping the most durable source of ethnographic authority.”<sup>80</sup> As Margaret Bruchac warns of Indigenous informant and museum archives, “Each document is an artifact that informs some part of the larger picture; yet if it is misunderstood or miscatalogued, it could function as a tool of erasure.”<sup>81</sup> My goal here is slightly different from Dauber’s, in that I wanted to see not why settler colonialism was able to proliferate, but *how*. How did these ideas make their way across the country and back into the museum? To me, “how” is a much more interesting question than “why,” and it allows certain possibilities for change. Finding out how something happened points us to questions we would otherwise be unable to answer, without placing blame on simplistic top-down omniscient approaches. It also locates power in the in-between liminal spaces, in relationships, and in “mindless work.” It shows how tools, technologies, materials (whatever you want to call them) were actually used, and how these practices inflicted harm from afar and through time. In this methodology, morality is therefore not located in a particular person’s or institution’s ideology. Instead, it arises from everyday practices and existence.

This is a book of specifics. I am interested in little things – the slow movements as terminologies change, the organization of drawers. I am interested in how colonial impulses to name and catalogue became inscribed in the very infrastructure of a museum – the Smithsonian’s NMNH – and what the ramifications of this inscription might be. Although a case study of a single institution, this book stands as an example of what we might learn when we disentangle the specifics of practices that encoded colonial ideologies about race, progress, and material culture into contemporary

digital records. I hope what readers glean from this study is not only a social history of anthropological record keeping at the NMNH, but also a broader appreciation and desire for inquiry about the cabinets and digital catalogue records that organize, classify, and perform, and the work that is needed to repair the colonial legacies of data around the world.

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