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# Collecting, Colonialism, and Community

12/27/2019

By Madison Williams

A commonplace recollection of 19th-century America evokes romanticized visions of an era known for dreams of manifest destiny, the ascendance of Jacksonian democracy, and the rise of the Gilded Age. However, this golden age of American expansion might be more accurately characterized by the U.S. government's cruel dispossession of Native Americans across the country through legislation that sustained government sanctioned violence and attempts at assimilation. Today, the enormous suffering felt by Native Americans at the hands of the U.S. government is no secret, yet this torture and enduring pain is thought of as a piece of the past. The problem with this attempt at public forgetting lies in the fact that "these settler ambitions, practices, and assertions" remain present, unchanged, and reproduced through the archival work done at this time.

[Archives](#) traditionally consist of a repository of historical documents, personal or scholarly papers, permanent records, and original documentation. They hold a collection of materials providing information about a place, institution, group of people, or individual; materials preserved because of the enduring value in the information they contain. Generally, archives are concerned with preserving primary sources, which is why archives are so often seen as unquestionably accurate and entirely neutral. After all, what could be more reliable, more credible, more true than an authentic artifact, a first-hand account, an original correspondence, or scientifically collected documentation?

Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson address these issues directly in their article "[Toward Slow Archives](#)," asserting that colonial power is more than just present in archival records, in fact, **"the history of collection is the history of colonialism"** (92). They explore the practices,



Edison's Home Phonograph  
released in 1896 (Source: Library of  
Congress)

policies, projects, and technologies responsible for producing the Native American records collected by researchers in the 19th-century, identifying the colonial influence present in the purpose of the information being collected, what they chose to include, and, perhaps most importantly, whose voices they choose to silence.

As the government rapidly advanced its efforts to displace, destruct, and assimilate Native Americans, researchers embarked on a mission to preserve "supposedly dying Native cultures and languages" (94), effectively linking "colonial efforts, territorial displacement, and preservation practices together under the nomenclature of scientific advancement" (94). These records—made possible thanks to new technologies such as [Thomas Edison's cylinder](#)

[phonographic recorder](#)—represent Native Americans as objects, void of perspective, and without voices. Pioneered (pun-intended) by anthropologist [Jesse Walter Fewkes](#), the quickly standardized use of the recorder in fieldwork to create "scientific documentation" sustained the colonial view of archival production as inherently un-bias. This silencing of Native American voices is powerfully illustrated by Christen and Anderson as they state: "Fewkes did not, of course, explicitly link the 'vanishing' or 'disappearing' of Native people, languages, and cultural practices to the nation's policies and practices of displacement, violence, and removal" (96)

Recently, the City of Milwaukee celebrated its first Indigenous Peoples' Day, a statewide officially designated holiday, which will serve as a permanent replacement for the federally recognized Columbus Day. The unveiling of one Milwaukee County Park's new signage memorialized this day as they proudly displayed the transformation of Columbus Park to Indigenous People's Park. This change is made in an effort to bring to light the often ignored injustice and violence



Milwaukee's New County Park Sign: Indigenous Peoples' Park (Source: FOX 6 News)

indigenous people suffered at the hands of Christopher Columbus, and, as stated by Milwaukee County Supervisor [Felesia Martin](#), to act as a measure "not to erase but to [create]... a complete narrative of U.S. history." Milwaukee County is home to a number of tribes, including the Menominee, Fox, Mascouten, Sauk, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Ho-Chunk; however, the impressive, and ultimately successful, campaign for renaming the park was launched solely by a tenacious group of students at Franklin's Indian Community School.

We can work to decolonialize Indigenous archives by intentionally "keeping colonial structures and practices in our view—as they are manifest in our institutions, policies, practices, and technologies—we can begin the work of tearing them down and building anew" (98). We can construct a new public memory, allowing Native Americans to control their own narrative, and, in turn, dissolving the power possessed by the colonial structures still in place today. Although renaming a local park may seem a small feat in the grand scheme of colonialism's effect on America today, it is a monumental accomplishment toward the effort of Native Americans in Milwaukee to control their own narrative and discontinue the possibility of public forgetting.