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“Sensitivity” at Work. A Double-Edged Sword

DCNtR Debate #2. Thinking About the Archive & Provenance Research

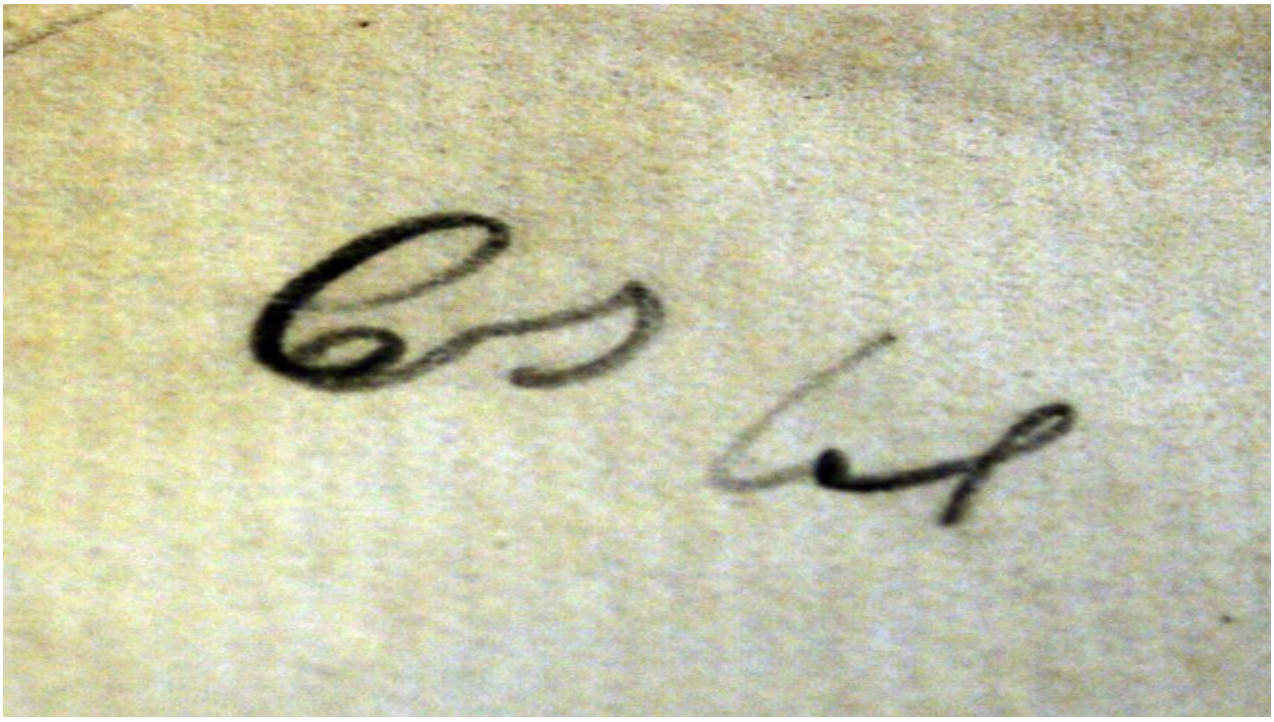
“Cultural sensitivity” has emerged as a central, though ambivalent, concept in my archival work of the past twenty years. Thereby, my experience has been markedly influenced by my regional focus on North America. Here, socio-political changes led to the passing of laws such as the Indian Religious Freedom Act and the Native Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1979 and 1990. While NAGPRA is quite specific as to which objects are to be considered for repatriation, the notion that collections do potentially contain “culturally sensitive” materials to be returned to Native communities after consultations with them stuck and eventually spread to other archival institutions as well.

My first project reflected this expansive trend. In 2004–2005, I had come across a wax-cylinder collection at the Berlin Phonogram Archive (BPA) that contained ceremonial songs of the Navajo. Knowing how culturally sensitive these songs were from my previous research, I proposed a collaboration that would work out guidelines for dealing with them in the future. At the same time, however, I was talking about songs that had been preserved on a rare non-native technical device, i.e., wax-cylinders. As part of the total body of wax-cylinder collections at the BPA, this particular Navajo collection had become subject to the protective measures of UNESCO. Thus, I was not only talking about “Navajo ceremonial songs,” but also about a wax-cylinder collection, which in its own right was protected as “heritage of mankind.”

However, issues of “cultural sensitivity” emerged as well when I tried to access secondary archival sources as part of my associated provenance research, such as

early anthropological field notes on the Navajo. I soon found myself barred by different archival institutions from viewing such material. In one case, the institutional representative even argued that almost all aspects of Navajo life are accompanied by ritual and are therefore potentially sacred and culturally sensitive. Generally speaking, I was told that I would have to get official clearance from the Navajo Nation first before I would be able to work with their archival material. Yet getting such a clearance was and is by no means a mere technical act but a very time-consuming and complicated endeavor. As a result, and while I eventually got the approval to work on the ceremonial songs by the Navajo Nation, these requirements effectively blocked my access to important archival sources in other archival institutions for which I would have had to make separate applications.

Issues of "cultural sensitivity" appeared again in a more recent provenance research project of mine that ultimately began in 2007 with a digitization and database project initiated by the U'mista cultural center in Alert Bay, BC, Canada. This project involved the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw material at the Ethnology Museum in Berlin. It set me on a research voyage that led in 2012 to my involvement with the still running critical edition project of Franz Boas's pathbreaking monograph "The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl" (1897), which makes heavy use of Berlin Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw objects. Thereby, the project draws together materials from over forty years of Boas' Northwest Coast research. As part of the research team, one of my main tasks had been to deal with the different kinds of German language resources, which means that I was and am dealing with a wide range of different forms of German script. Amongst these, Boas' shorthand notes, which are the main script form in his field notes, became a true challenge.



Franz Boas's signature in shorthand. © Photograph by the author.

While working on the subject, new hurdles emerged from the changing conditions at the institution, which houses most of Boas' papers. In 2014, this institution, like many other American archives, had decided to change its policies as a means of decolonizing its institution and introduced its "Protocols for the Treatment of Indigenous Materials." These state that it considers all "indigenous materials" not checked by the respective tribal nations to be "potentially culturally sensitive" and therefore not fit for publication. So while this affected my original intent to work and publish on Boas' shorthand field notes as such, it did not affect my research as part of my Boas 1897 work, as our team already collaborated with the Kwakwaka'wakw. Still, generally speaking, such protocols also raise important questions concerning a scholar's right to his own writings and how to define fundamental concepts such as "indigenous" or "non-indigenous," intellectual property, as well as the concept "culturally sensitive" itself, and what it is supposed to entail. This is essential since, in

contrast to Australia, the American context has not yet produced a graded categorization of "sensitivity" for anthropological museum objects.

In my current work, I also realize how much "cultural sensitivity" is gaining in importance. While just a few years back, it had virtually no impact on exhibition-making, conditions have changed dramatically by now. Today, hardly anyone would question a decision not to show an object on this basis, as I do when introducing the secret-sacred category in an upcoming exhibition. Instead, I now ponder the issue of whether it is feasible – and if so, how – to show the associated object card, as it depicts part of the object's design. This case also shows that one has to be mindful of the issues of self-censorship.

And so, I have to confess that I am of two minds about the concept of "cultural sensitivity." While I agree with the need to be mindful of "sensitive" matters on both a theoretical and a case-specific level, the concept itself remains disturbingly unspecific, both in its content and effects. While I understand why American archival institutions, for example, are increasingly changing their access policies, and while I basically agree, I also observe that these issues are mixed with yet other problematic concepts such as "sovereignty" and "cultural self-determination." Therefore, I feel unease about these developments, which likely will increasingly become the norm. Not only because they affect scholarly work with archival materials, and therefore provenance research, but primarily because these notions go along with sets of essentializing assumptions about "culture," "nations," "knowledge," and "race." And so, while I understand the history behind these developments, I increasingly come to consider the concept of "cultural sensitivity" to be a double-edged sword.

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