[Early Native American Digital Collections](#)

Scholars and teachers of early Native American studies have access to an increasing number of well-curated digital collections as resources for our work. We might characterize these collections in two loose groups: digital *archives*, which are sizable repositories of print and manuscript materials made electronically visible and searchable; and digital *exhibits,* which seek to tell stories about the kinds of materials and histories that scholars have often overlooked. The terms I invoke here—"archive" and "exhibit"—are contestable and far from mutually exclusive. But they represent different approaches to the larger project of decolonizing archives, ranging from digital repatriation (in which electronic surrogates of documents are theoretically available to the host communities that produced them) to deeper reflections on the colonial nature of the archive itself.

Some of the best collections hail from colleges and universities with significant print archives and the resources to make them electronically available. Dartmouth College, for instance, recently unveiled *[The Occom Circle Project](#),* which showcases its trove of writings by the eighteenth-century Mohegan minister Samson Occom and his network of relations. This Website began over ten years ago, when a visiting Mohegan elder asked English professor Ivy

Schweitzer and college archivist Peter Carini how they could bring more attention to Occom's importance at the college. With a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dartmouth's team digitized over 500 documents: their entire Occom collection (letters, sermons, hymns, journals, petitions and tribal documents) as well as letters by people who knew him. These include his (in)famous employer, Dartmouth founder Eleazar Wheelock, and Native students at Wheelock's Indian school.

The site is clean and easy to use, and texts are searchable by author, recipient, or date. Users have the option of looking at high-quality page scans, transcribed texts (with a further choice to select diplomatic or modernized transcription), or transcriptions and page images side-by-side. Pop-up boxes annotate key people, places, organizations, and events.


1. *The Occom Circle Project*, courtesy of Dartmouth College.

This, then, is a fairly straightforward digital edition, one that seeks to improve visibility and access to documents in the institution's own repository. What is powerful about migrating such a collection online is that digital links, search capabilities, and facsimile images can help reveal a major historical figure's "broad network of historical relations, allowing us to better appreciate the cultural world he inhabited and shaped" ("Project History").

Other digital collections in the field of Native American studies have sought to engage indigenous people more directly in their development. At the *Yale Indian Papers Project* (YIPP), in fact, "[T]he document corpus is selected in a manner that ensures vital input from tribal partners," with Mohegan, Schaghticoke, and other tribal historians selecting and annotating documents that *they* find significant to their communities ("About the Collection"). These include seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century documents written by, about, and for Native people primarily in what is now southeastern New England. While the Occom project draws on a single, localized print collection, YIPP gathers documents now dispersed all over the world, from various Connecticut state and historical archives all the way to the British Museum. Executive editor Paul Grant-Costa, who has decades of experience working with New England tribal nations on federal recognition petitions, is well-acquainted with a central problem in regional historiography: the "lack of published primary

source materials, despite the existence of thousands of relevant documents," compounded by the difficulty of accessing such far-flung and archaic documents ("About the Collection").

The result of such painstaking collaborative work (and the benefits of working with YIPP and OCP side by side) can be seen in a document like the "Account of the Death of a Christian Mohegan Indian"—identified as Occom's only after careful comparison of this documents to other pieces of Occom's handwriting, and consultation with Mohegan elders and historians. Clicking on the document image will bring up a gorgeous full-size facsimile; clicking on "Scholarly Transcription" will bring up a PDF file containing a straightforward transcription of the text without corrections or changes to line and page breaks. Clicking on "Annotation" opens a new window with what is perhaps some of YIPP's most important work: a rigorous, modernized, and thoroughly footnoted transcription. This contains hyperlinks to short biographies of people mentioned in the document, which are in turn hyperlinked to other biographies. As we find in the Occom project, this is a powerful method of revealing the extensive, historic networks among indigenous intellectuals and leaders.
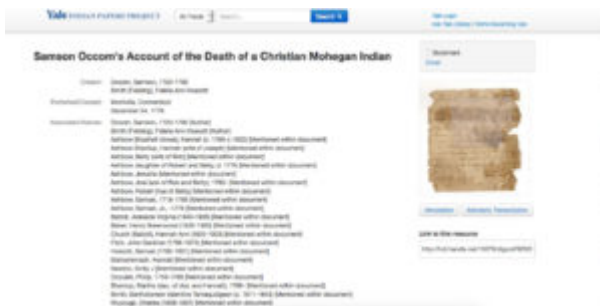
2. *The Yale Indian Papers Project*, courtesy of Yale University.

I chose this admittedly less-than-vivid screenshot to further highlight the incredible metadata that YIPP is compiling. In addition to the expected fields of creator, language, genre, format, rights, and so on, YIPP is carefully curating names, dates, and topics associated with these texts. As you can see in just this partial example, these fields can be very thickly populated indeed. YIPP's editors are, like many of the best researchers in this field, attempting to decolonize metadata, approaching it, as Grant-Costa explains, "from the bottom up, from a researcher's perspective and from the Native perspective" (personal communication). This kind of work is extremely expensive, time-consuming, and labor-intensive, but it is impossible to overestimate its contribution to future scholarship.

With a somewhat larger corpus and perhaps more complex workflow, YIPP presents itself as more a work in progress than the *Occom Circle Project.* It is much larger, for one thing, with well over 2,000 documents already digitized and catalogued (though not all appear with transcriptions and annotations). In its current iteration, it is not necessarily built for easy browsing. Together, though, the *Occom Project* and *Yale Indian Papers* have given us a considerable

corpus of indigenous-related materials digitized, transcribed, edited, and annotated to the highest scholarly standards. These collections are leaders in this field.

Still other notable digital collections emanate from archiving institutions like the American Philosophical Society or the American Antiquarian Society (AAS). The latter has taken a slightly different approach in the digital exhibit *From English to Algonquian: Early American Translations.* Its collection proper presently contains only thirteen items—high-resolution images from well-known texts like the Eliot Bible, *The Massachuset Psalter,* and *New Englands First Fruits*—most of which are already digitized in other databases (e.g., America's Historical Imprints) but are therefore unfortunately behind a paywall. Instead of providing purportedly complete access to the texts themselves, AAS is telling a story about their colonial history and current history. (It is worth noting here that AAS staff members have been exceedingly generous in sharing their expertise in using this particular open-access platform, Omeka, to create digital exhibits.)

3. Front page of *From English to Algonquian*, courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Curated by Kimberly Pelkey (Nipmuc), head of AAS readers' services, *From English to Algonquian* teaches visitors about the history of collaboration between Native intellectuals and settlers in producing Algonquian-language texts, *and* about the resurgent use of these texts today by the Nipmuc, Mohegan, and Wampanoag tribes in their language-revitalization projects. It is a richly contextual site, built around a timeline of events in colonial history, brief biographies of major historic players ("People") and publishers ("Organizations"), and reflections on indigenous uses of alphabetic, print literacy both past ("Translations") and present ("Current Projects").

There are other up-and-coming projects of relevance to scholars in early Native American studies, many presented at Dartmouth's recent Indigenous Archives symposium. The Kim-Wait Eisenberg Collection at Amherst College is particularly exciting, as it aspires to be a comprehensive digital collection of public-domain books authored by Native American people. The best of these collections

are proceeding slowly and thoughtfully, with extensive consultation and collaboration with a wide range of indigenous scholars, both institutional- and community-based, and in so doing they are helping to decolonize archives.

As this short survey suggests, the field is still quite emergent. We have nothing like the kinds of vast digitized corpora available to scholars working in pre-1923 American and/or western European fields. As a result, Native American studies has seen next to none of the kinds of digital humanities scholarship so abundant, for instance, among early modernists, who are busy topic modeling, text mining, mapping, and performing other kinds of [distant reading](). But the lack of a corpus is likely only one factor here. Scholars in Native American and Indigenous studies are increasingly sensitive to the fact that tribal communities do not necessarily want to digitize everything, nor do they necessarily want their cultural heritage to be treated as so much data. Whether our readings are distant or close, many of us want to engage tribal communities as much as possible in our work. Doing so requires the kinds of slow, piecemeal, and self-reflexive approaches exemplified by YIPP and AAS. It also requires us to think hyper-critically about questions of scale. Many scholars are feeling the pressure to identify and digitize the largest possible collections, especially when it comes time to attract major funding. Yet it is also possible to present just a small collection of items—[or even a single item]()—meticulously curated, in a way that prompts visitors to a Website to reflect on how particular documents and objects wound up where they are, on who owns this heritage, on what it even means to have access to indigenous knowledge and culture in the first place.

Indeed, while many of the most highly praised digital projects hail, unsurprisingly, from universities and museums with a baseline of staff, equipment, and infrastructure, many tribal communities are quietly beginning their own. Some are sharing collections in the [Mukurtu]() content-management system, which allows them to control who can access particular items and collections. Others are simply scanning and storing documents and photographs in-house. Still others are running private and public Facebook groups, where community members share and discuss archival photographs and pieces of writing. These kinds of projects—what Alex Gil might call "minimal computing"—deserve to be brought into the digital humanities fold. At the very least, they break down our stodgy periodization, which would separate "early" Native American studies from the contemporary. More profoundly, they challenge us to think about what has been lost, stolen, and saved, by whom and for whom. A good deal of large-scale collecting, after all, was historically part of large-scale colonialism. But tribal museums, offices, and elders have also been saving and cherishing their own materials, and they are increasingly interested in digitizing them and circulating them anew, even as they remain concerned about intellectual property and cultural protection. Digital platforms give us new opportunities to create dialogues between those large-scale, open-access institutional collections and smaller, intensively community-curated electronic items. If we seize these new opportunities, perhaps we might start to see new kinds of electronic and material worlds: radiant textualities dominated less by the

ethnographic, and more by indigenous survival and resurgence.

Further Reading

Robin Boast and Jim Enote, "Virtual Repatriation: It Is Neither Virtual nor Repatriation," *Heritage in the Context of Globalization,* ed. Peter Biehl and Christopher Prescott (New York, 2013).

Laura R. Braunstein, Peter Carini, and Hazel-Dawn Dumpert, "'And There Was a Large Number of People': The Occom Circle Project at the Dartmouth College Library," *Digital Humanities in the Library: Challenges and Opportunities for Subject Specialists,* ed. Arianne Harsell-Gundy, Laura Braunstein, Liorah Golomb. Association of College & Research Libraries (2015): 225–240.

Kimberly Christen, "Does Information Really Want to Be Free?: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Question of Openness." *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 2870–2893.

"Forum: Text Analysis at Scale," *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2016), ed. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold. Web, accessed March 2, 2017.

Alex Gil, "The User, the Learner and the Machines We Make," *Minimal Computing: A Working Group of GO::DH* (May 21, 2015). Web, Jan. 1, 2017.

Paul Grant-Costa, Tobias Glaza, and Michael Sletcher. "The Common Pot: Editing Native American Materials," *Scholarly Editing* 33 (2012). Web, May 20, 2013.

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