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Cultural Sensitivity in the Archives: Digitizing Controversial Materials, a Balancing Act

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Cultural Sensitivity in the Archives



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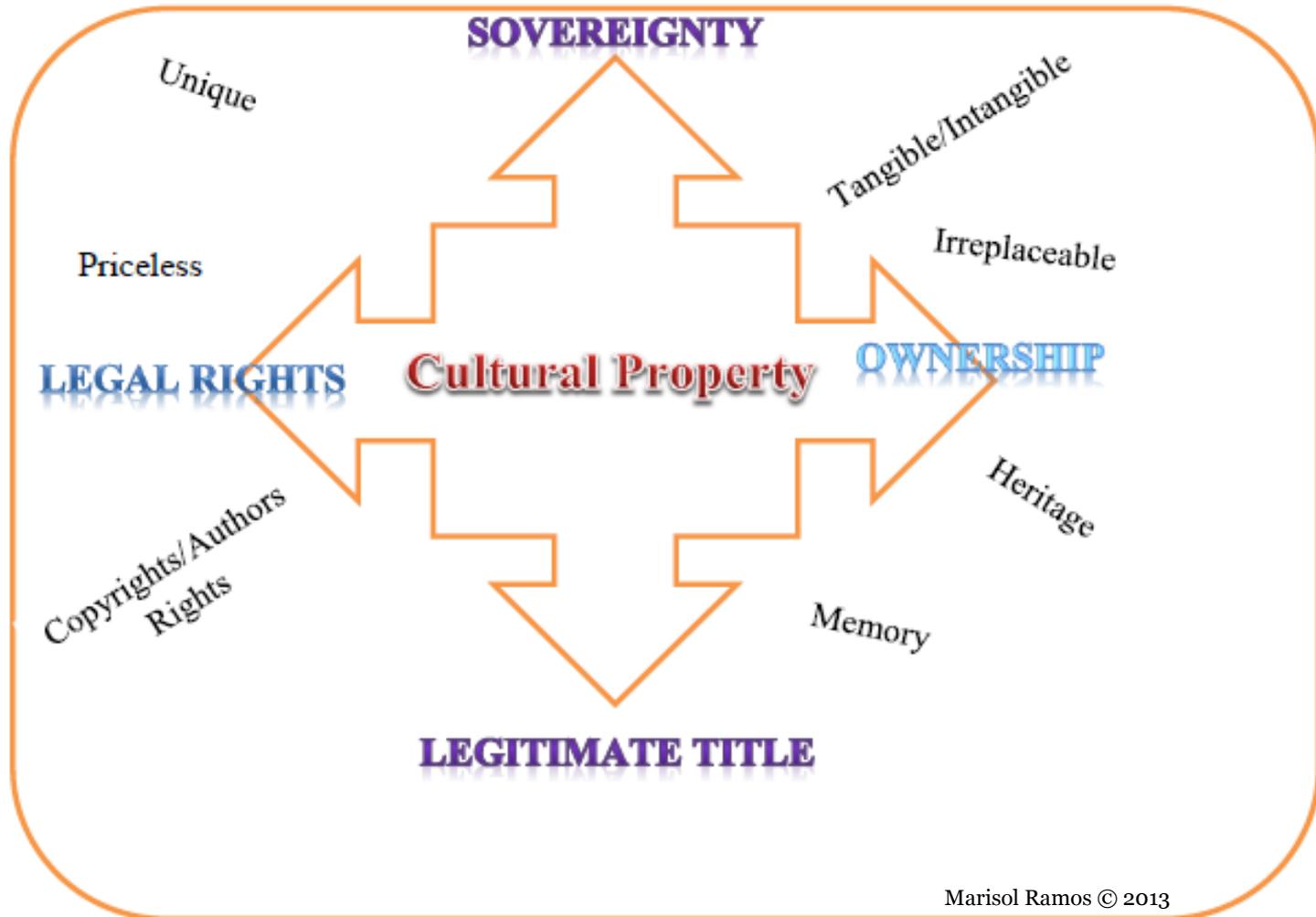
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Playing with Definitions

- What words comes to mind when thinking about:
 - Cultural Property
 - Cultural Heritage
 - Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural Property



Cultural Property “Legal” Definition

- From the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970
 - “For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘cultural property’ means property which, on religious or secular grounds, is specifically designated by each State as being of importance for archaeology, prehistory, history, literature, art or science”

What is consider Cultural Property?

Key Descriptors
Rare/Unique
Collections/Specimens
Original
Historical
Archeological/Paleontological
Artistic
Antiquities
Scientific value
Property of ...

What is consider Cultural Property?

Examples

Archives/Personal Papers of national leaders, thinkers, artists, events of national importance

Coins, furniture, musical instruments

Fauna, Flora, Minerals, Fossils

rare manuscripts and incunabula, old books, documents and publications of special interest (historical, artistic, scientific, literary, etc.) singly or in collections

Original works of arts (paintings, sculptures, engravings, prints, lithographs)

Archeological and Paleontological discoveries

Archives, including sound, photographic and cinematographic archives

Cultural Heritage (Words Cloud)



Definitions for Cultural Heritage

- From UNESCO's Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage
 - For the purposes of this Convention, the following shall be considered as "cultural heritage":
 - **Monuments**
 - **Groups of Buildings**
 - **Sites**
- From UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage
 - Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes **traditions** or **living expressions inherited** from our ancestors and **passed on** to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

Cultural Sensitivity

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** “Knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values (i.e. better or worse, right or wrong) to those cultural differences.”
- **Related concept: Cultural Awareness:** “Developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values. Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others.”

Cultural Heritage in the Archives

- **What do we have?**
 - Manuscripts, Recordings, Realia/ 3D Objects, Newspapers, Personal Papers, ethnographies
- **To whom, really, belong this cultural heritage/property?**
 - “Our”: created locally, nationally in the US, mainstream groups
 - “Other”: created in another country; created by indigenous people (here or elsewhere), non-mainstream groups
- **How do we answer these questions?**
 - How did you get my [country/people] materials?
 - Why do you have our [country/people] materials?
 - Why I can't have access to it? Why I have to pay for it?

Cultural property/Heritage at UConn

- **Puerto Rican Legal Court Cases**

- Approx. 5000 documents dated between 1840s to the 1890s, covering the full range of cases that might have been brought to civil courts in those times mainly disputes over economic holdings such as land disputes, sale of slaves, and similar materials.
- Handwritten manuscripts with many preservation issues (foxing, fading, water damage, etc.) Part of a bigger grouping of court records housed at the AGPR-Archivo General de Puerto Rico (the de facto national archives of the island)
- Purchased in 2000 from a New Jersey antiquarian who claimed records did not have any legal claims elsewhere.

Cultural Property/Heritage at UConn

- Contacted in 2009 by an archivist in the Archivo General de Puerto Rico with a request to either return or make photocopy of the whole collection because it belongs to Puerto Rico
- Unable to fulfill either request because legal and preservation issues
- Met unofficially with PR archivist at SAA in 2010 where the archivist asked if there was any other way to get access to the collection...

Cultural property/Heritage at UConn

- Reasons to digitize
 - To make the collection accessible to the people of Puerto Rico, I was able to obtain a grant from the Center of Research Libraries—LAMP for \$15,000 to digitize the collection. The digital collection is available at the Internet Archives, <http://tinyurl.com/77uetsn>
- Cultural Sensitivity issues related to this collection
 - Saying no to repatriate this collection without sounding patronizing

Cultural property/Heritage at UConn

- Potential Cultural Sensitivity issues
 - We are planning to create a crowdsourcing project to help with the transcribing of these legal records
 - Since these are civil court cases there is a possibility of family members to feel embarrassed by:
 - Family members owning slaves
 - By be descendant of slaves (which may shatter preconceived ideas of race in a particular family lineage)
 - Because these are legal proceedings, making the transcription available may:
 - Re-ignite family feud regarding lands holdings
 - The information found may be abuse by others

Cultural property/Heritage at UConn

- **The Valeriano Weyler Papers**
 - The collection includes administrative, military, and personal correspondence between Valeriano Weyler and several individuals during his years as a public officer of the Spanish Government.
 - Of special interest are the manuscripts, typescripts and reports concerning the activities of the Ten Years War in Cuba, the Carlista War in Spain, the Philippine Guerrillas War, and Barcelona disturbance between 1910 and 1913.

Cultural Property/Heritage at UConn

- Consideration before digitizing the Valeriano Papers collection vis-à-vis cultural sensitivity:
 - “Valeriano Weyler is a significant figure in Spanish history and one of the most controversial. Throughout the years, historical opinion has identified him as both a heroic officer and as a bloody and defeated general, particularly because of his actions during his years in Cuba.”
 - Among Cubans, both in the island and in exiles, Valeriano Weyler is remembered as the “Butcher” and any attempt to glorify his life history in consider an insult

Cultural Property/Heritage at UConn

- In Spain, military historians and archivists considering him a very important figure at the end of the Spanish Empire period.
 - Many were horrified to know that we have his personal papers (only a small fraction of his records are in Spain)
 - But they were also happy to learn that we are considering digitizing this collection
- So, how are we moving forward?

Moving Forward with Digitization and beyond

- **Following archival standards and practices**
 - Make sure that background information and descriptions are written in a fair way with an emphasis to the informational value of the material
 - Include/link to disclaimer and take down policies and procedures to handle user requests or complaints regarding the material
 - When responding to requests/complains consider the cultural context from users—specially if they have a cultural and/or emotional connection with the collection and /or the historical events describe in the collection

Moving Forward with Digitization and beyond

- If planning to do a crowdsourcing project
 - Make sure that you have a vetting system to corroborate and validate the transcription
 - Targeted recruiting: Finding the right match between records and volunteers is key.
 - Instead of having an open call for volunteers to transcribe the documents, invite first historians, grad and undergrad students in history, archives, language departments (if the documents are in non-English languages)
 - Training: Do not train your volunteers to only know how to use the transcribing tool, but make sure they have an understanding regarding ethics and cultural sensitivity; writing practices and cultural practices that may be reflected in the records.
 - Could be a tutorial online or at the archives

Conclusion

- Taking in consideration cultural sensitivity as we acquire, manage and make accessible cultural heritage/property collections in our archives is a necessity in these days where collections are becoming more accessible online.
- By continue doing what we do best: establishing sound archival policies and practices that take in consideration the needs and concerns of the different stakeholders of your particular cultural heritage/property collections, we show respect and understanding and a willingness to empathize with those users that have an emotional & cultural connection with the collections under our responsibility, which open the doors for healthy, long term relationships with all stakeholders.

Resources

- Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,
<http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>
- Intangible Cultural Heritage,
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00002>
- Cultural Sensitivity & Cultural Awareness definitions,
http://www.bigsisters.bc.ca/site-bbbs/media/BCLowerMainland/Cultural_Sensitivity_Awareness.pdf
- Ramos, Marisol (2012). [“Access to Cultural Property and Heritage: The Puerto Rican Civil Court Documents Case Story”](#), *Memoria*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2012.

Archival Collections

- Valeriano Wyler Papers (Finding Aid),
<http://doddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/findaids/Wyler/MSS19700006.html>
- Puerto Rican Civil Court Documents Collection (Finding Aid),
<http://doddcenter.uconn.edu/asc/findaids/PRC Court/MSS20000130.html>