Public Humanities (2025), 1, e113, 1–8
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.10032

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

CASE STUDY

Re-Presenting Native Americans in South Dakota's Archival History: A Public Humanities Project

Anna Reich

Department of Art, Augustana University, Sioux Falls, SD, USA
Email: areich@augie.edu

(Received 10 July 2024; revised 17 February 2025; accepted 17 May 2025)

Abstract

South Dakota, home to nine federally and state-recognized tribes, bears witness to a rich Native American history that predates colonialism. Yet, the representation of Native Americans in institutional archives remains sparse, often curated through the lens of non-Native creators. Addressing this gap involved a collaborative effort among Augustana University, Native American students from a federally funded tribal boarding school, and a regional cultural institution to facilitate the reclamation of archival narratives and the re-presentation of Native American histories through an innovative public humanities initiative. This project aimed to re-present archival material through creative interventions by young Native American artists, adhering to the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession. By transforming existing archival material into new artworks, the project fostered a deeper understanding of Native American history and its contemporary implications. Public exhibitions of these reinterpretations facilitated engagement with historical traumas and challenged normative perceptions of Native American experiences. The interdisciplinary approach highlighted the importance of Native American agency in curatorial processes, resulting in reflective public exhibitions. This project exemplifies how public humanities research can bridge historical gaps, support cultural recognition, and facilitate the reclamation of institutionalized narratives.

Keywords: archival research; Native American artists; Native American missionary boarding schools; Native American contemporary issues; re-presenting Indigenous histories

South Dakota bears witness to a rich Native American history that predates colonialism. Yet, the representation of Native Americans in institutional archives remains sparse, often curated through the lens of non-Native creators. Addressing this gap, students, faculty, and staff at Augustana University (AU) partnered with Flandreau Indian School to facilitate the reclamation of archival narratives and the re-presentation of Native American histories through an innovative public humanities initiative.

This article explores the collaborative effort between AU and Flandreau Indian School (FIS), funded by the Council for Independent Colleges (CIC), to transform archival materials into a dynamic public exhibition that brings crucial historical narratives into relevant contemporary discourse. A key facet of this project lies in the methodological approach of re-presenting history that emphasizes Native agency in archival reinterpretation. This case

study resonates with wider efforts to decolonize native archives, ensuring Indigenous voices shape the historical narratives told about them. The structure of this article follows this journey: first, an exploration of historical absences in archives; second, a discussion of collaborative methodologies employed; and third, an assessment of the impact on participants and the broader community.

1. Addressing historical context and archival absences

The Great Plains geographic region is an area that was occupied by Native Americans prior to colonialism and genocide by American settlers. Currently, the state of South Dakota is home to nine federally and state-recognized tribes.[1] While Native Americans are an important part of the state's (and nation's) history, the visible or recognized experiences of such people are largely absent in academically institutionalized social structures (such as archival museums) and in outward-facing and publicly accessible records. This absence mimics the systemic cultural and historical shortcomings in our nation's ongoing relationship with Native Americans, which, to this day, continue to reproduce highly inequitable opportunities and life outcomes for this group across all metrics of well-being. Between 1870 and 1969, 30 federal Native American boarding schools were operated in South Dakota.[2] These boarding schools were part of a broader U.S. government effort to assimilate Native American children into Euro-American culture. During this process, Native children were removed from their families, forbidden to speak their languages, and subjected to harsh conditions in environments that sought to erase Indigenous identities. The historical trauma of these institutions continues to impact Native communities today, making the act of reclaiming and reinterpreting archival records a deeply political and personal endeavor. FIS, now operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), was founded in 1871 as a mission school, and in 1892, it became a boarding school known as the Riggs Institute, named after the Reverend Stephen Riggs, an early pioneering missionary in the region.[3]

We believe that facilitating any form of historical recognition and reflexivity is a primary goal to serve the public good and increase social justice; however, it is important that the process and outcomes for historical recognition and reflexivity rest firmly within Native American ownership. Rather than merely curating pre-existing materials, the initiative encourages Native American students to engage with and transform archival content. Through creative interventions, these students generate new representations of history within recognized institutional spaces, such as the Center for Western Studies (CWS) and the Washington Pavilion Center for Visual Arts. This approach, grounded in Indigenous self-determination, aligns with the ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) principles set forth by First Nations in Canada.[4]

2. Project overview

In the spring of 2019, AU was among 25 member institutions that received a grant from CIC as part of the Humanities Research for the Public Good Program.[5] In the calendar year 2023,

[1] South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations. n.d. https://sdtribalrelations.sd.gov/tribes/nine-tribes.aspx.
[2] U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. n.d. https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/appendix_a_b_school_listing_profiles_508.pdf.
[3] "Flandreau Indian School History." n.d. https://www.fischaplaincy.com/school-history.
[4] First Nations Information Governance Centre. n.d. https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/.
[5] Council of Independent Colleges. n.d. https://cic.edu/opportunity/public-humanities/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Augustana was part of a cohort of 13 previous grant recipients receiving "sustaining grants" to support new projects. All funded projects from each grant period were required to do the following:

1. Make use of a significant archival, library, or museum collection held by the college or university.

2. Collaborate with community-based organizations to share this research with the public.

3. Address topics of importance and interest to local communities.

To meet these requirements, AU faculty, students, and staff worked collaboratively with FIS, one of four remaining federally supported and governed boarding schools serving Native Americans in the United States, and with curators from the Washington Pavilion (WP), the premier exhibition and performance space in South Dakota. Through this collaboration, faculty, the CWS collections specialist, and WP curators facilitated Native American students in the process of retaking ownership of archival history, enabling them to respond to absences and inequities through the "re-presentation" of archival data via the transformative reuse of the material.[6]

This project was based on the review and re-presentation of materials from three archival collections at CWS: the *Blue Cloud Abbey Collection, Harold Shunk Collection*, and *Elizabeth B. Bradley Papers.*[7] These collections are from specific individuals with very different affiliations but who represent prominent institutional structures (religion and government) that had significant contact with Native persons. FIS students used reproductions from these collections to create artworks that respond to institutionalized repression and archival silences by re-presenting this archival material that they reauthored and reclaimed. During a series of visits to AU campus, and with the support of AU faculty and CWS staff, FIS students completed the following objectives:

[6] From the archivist's disciplinary perspective, the practice of "transformative reuses" of archival materials has garnered professional discussion. In particular, our archive specialist Liz Cisar attended a panel at the Upper Midwest Digital Collections Conference held on November 8–9, 2018 titled, "Transformative Reuse: Inviting Artists into the Archives," where presenters discussed projects currently using this approach at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (speaker: Ann Hanlon) and the University of Minnesota Libraries (speaker: Linnea Anderson) (*Transformative Reuse: Inviting Artists into the Archives* 2018).

[7] *Blue Cloud Abbey Collection* 1870–2004, 115 boxes, including glass-plate negatives, film negatives, prints, and slides. Estimated 85,000 items. This is the research collection created by the American Indian Culture Research Center formerly located at Blue Cloud Abbey in Marvin, SD. Spanning the years 1870–2004, it documents the missionary work of Blue Cloud Abbey's Benedictine monks with local Native populations, especially in the areas of spirituality and education. There is no organization to the collection beyond format, and there is currently no working index. (The 2019–2020 project focused on a single box [ID#s 4476–4530] that includes some of the oldest content in the collection.) *Harold Shunk Collection* 1861–1987, 51 boxes. This collection consists of a variety of Harold Shunk's personal and professional documents (including photographs taken by or obtained by him), as an employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior, 1933–1968. Of particular interest (30199): Boxes 27 and 28 (Government Documents That Primarily Focus on Native Americans); Box 30 (Promotional Pamphlets of Sioux Tribes); and Boxes 32–43 (Photographs). *Elizabeth B. Bradley Papers* 1910–1922, 1953, 1 Folder/2 Scrapbooks. Part of the larger South Dakota Episcopal Diocese Archives, this sub-collection documents the activities and impressions of Elizabeth Bradley as a photographer and a missionary. Of particular interest (40011.01): Elizabeth B. Bradley Papers, Photos (Scrapbook), Vol. X.; (40005.02): Native Americans and their families, and Indian camps (1894, mid-1900s, 1903).

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1. Learn foundational archival research and data collection methods.

2. Analyze archival collections and select materials for reproduction.

3. Learn about contemporary artists working with archival collections and colonial themes.

4. Create visuals/artworks that function as interventions and re-presentations.

In the first cycle of this project (2019–2020), the AU undergraduate researcher conducted a content analysis of the Elizabeth Bradley Scrapbook and employed existing academic theories on the relationship between American settlers, missionaries, and colonialism with Native Americans in the United States to provide context for their interpretation of Bradley's scrapbook. This research was presented in the public exhibition.

In the second cycle of this project (2023), the AU undergraduate researcher, a member of the Cherokee Nation, used existing ArcGIS data and archival records to create a list of all mission and government boarding schools that existed in South Dakota and their approximate locations. This project launched a much larger and more comprehensive study of the original locations of boarding schools in South Dakota, currently being undertaken by the AU faculty member on this grant. Additionally, the WP opened its collection of Northern Plains Tribal art for AU's undergraduate researchers to study and curate into the exhibition. The goal of the second cycle of this project was to not only provide a platform for students to respond to archival histories and archival absences but to also promote critical engagement with the art institution as a repository for native artwork and artifacts that has not historically given the due consideration to Native American artists, makers, and creatives. Therefore, it is important to question the role of non-Native curators, non-Native art historians, and non-Native collectors in establishing an evaluative system for Native artwork (throughout history and in the contemporary gallery space) as well as the continued barriers of access individuals in Indigenous communities face. Supporting Native American curatorial agency in the gallery space further challenges the social and academic construction of "Native" artwork and exhibition. This enables Native American (students) to reinterpret and re-present existing archival materials, creating new inclusion of Native voices that have been silenced or unrecognized institutionally and historically.[8]

Students approached the archival materials with excitement and deep engagement, eager to explore and interpret the records. When confronting the difficult realities of colonial and genocidal histories, they responded more thoughtfully to morning reflections on the previous day's research rather than debriefs at the end of long archival sessions. Throughout the archival research portion of this project, AU faculty ensured that FIS students had ample breaks and a walk to lunch to ease both emotional and mental burnout. Despite the weight of the task at hand, FIS students were decisive when selecting materials to represent through art, choosing sources that resonated with their personal or collective knowledge and understanding of Native and colonial history in the United States. Undergraduate researchers and FIS students alike found the materials incredibly relevant and thought-provoking, and any challenges in supporting student research (at both the high school and

[8] This approach echoes the ideal of self-determination in research and information governance that follows principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) for First Nations in Canada. First Nations Information Governance Centre. 2020. See https://fnigc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/5776c4ee9387f966e6771aa93a04f389_ocap_path_to_fn_information_governance_en_final.pdf.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

undergraduate levels) were associated with the emotional toll of engaging with historical trauma. Counseling support was provided during all archival visits by staff from FIS and the BIE. There is robust interest in continuing this work from all partnering organizations; all of whom are committed to a cost-sharing model to support annual iterations of this project.

3. The process of "re-presenting" history

"Re-presentation" is a process that transcends mere visibility and ownership; it involves transforming archival records through interdisciplinary methodologies. FIS students, guided by AU faculty and student researchers, navigate and curate archival materials, creating visuals and artworks that respond to institutionalized repression and archival silences. This transformative reuse of archival content allows Native American students to infuse their perspectives into historical narratives, challenging normative perceptions and creating a dialogic space for public engagement. This approach follows the principles of OCAP delineated by First Nations in Canada to assert and ensure self-determination in research and information governance for Indigenous students, scholars, researchers, and communities.[9]

Among the many clear—and highly successful— examples of "re-presentation" in the work of FIS students was Atlantis' artwork "Untitled." In her piece, Atlantis selected a roughly 8 × 10-inch black-and-white photograph of a class of 40 Native American boarding school students gathered around a nun who is seated on the steps of a building we might presume was a classroom or workroom. At the base of the photograph is the label "Studio Benedictine," along with "Stephan, South Dakota." This photograph is from the archive of the Blue Cloud Abbey, a division of Benedictine monks who taught at numerous schools across the northern plains of the United States and who owned and operated three missionary boarding schools, one being Immaculate Conception in Stephan, South Dakota. Atlantis had the photograph enlarged to nearly double the original size, which allowed her to alter the image with more accuracy. As studio work commenced, Atlantis took a pair of scissors and began cutting the ends of her hair. She then proceeded to glue her hair carefully around the faces of the children in the photograph; giving each child back the long hair that was forcefully cut as part of the cultural gentrification performed by missionaries. In her artist statement, Atlanits wrote, "You see these kids here. Their hair was cut. So I wanted to add some of that hair back." This incredibly moving artwork exemplifies the core of this collaborative project, creating space for Indigenous makers, scholars, and creatives to directly reinterpret and re-present archival material in a way that is authentically their perspective, changing ownership and authorship, and, more importantly, (re)shaping public conversation and consciousness.

4. Engaging the political

This project engages with the political beyond the binaries of ownership and representation. It seeks to create a more holistic understanding of history, one that acknowledges colonial legacies as contemporary and deeply felt realities. By questioning the role of non-Native curators, art historians, and collectors in defining Native artwork, this initiative highlights structural inequities in cultural institutions. Moreover, it empowers Native students to assert their agency in shaping historical discourse, demonstrating that archival reinterpretation is both a creative and a political act.

[9] First Nations Information Governance Centre. n.d. https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FIS student Malea's art project—*Will You Feed My Fish?*—directly engages with the political by juxtaposing the historical exploitation of Indigenous people with the ongoing and pervasive social, institutional, and political attitudes of feigning care and abject neglect. The work is based on a vintage postcard featuring a photograph of a group of Native women —part of a long history in which Indigenous identities were commodified and circulated as souvenirs, reducing real lives to collectible imagery. The postcard's original sender wrote a message casually requesting for someone to feed their pet fish—if it had not already died. This mirrors the delayed and conditional concern often shown toward Indigenous communities. Malea's artist statement delineates the truth in these contrasting themes: Like the fish referenced on this postcard, Native people have been systematically ignored until they are on the brink of disappearance, receiving attention only when it is nearly too late. By drawing this parallel, Malea exposes the ways in which colonial frameworks continue to shape perceptions of Indigenous existence, questioning who is deemed worthy of care, when that care is offered, and what form that care takes.

5. Outcomes and public engagement

The culmination of both cycles of this project were public exhibitions at the WP, featuring the reinterpreted archival materials and artworks by FIS and contextual research by AU students. These exhibitions serve as a platform for public dissemination, fostering engagement with challenging historical and contemporary issues.

In the 2019–2020 academic year, the first iteration of this project was viewed by over 12,000 people, including being featured during the South Dakota Community Foundation annual event. In response to COVID-19, Augustana faculty and the WP held a virtual Zoom discussion that featured artist talks from the undergraduate student researcher and FIS student artists. FIS utilized e-learning during the fall of 2020; therefore, regrettably, the majority of Native students who participated in the process were unable to see their work installed in the WP. In the 2023 grant cycle, a new group of students had the full experience of archival research, creative intervention, exhibition of their artwork, and engagement with the public. The project was viewed by over 20,000 people during the 5-month exhibition and the opening drew an audience of over 200 people. Additionally, the WP staff created a feedback box for the exhibition with the question: "How can we re-present our histories?" This prompt helped passive museum guests become active exhibition viewers by challenging them to engage with one of the larger and more open-ended questions that can come from archival research. There were many thoughtful responses that seemed to internalize the broader themes of the exhibition. Here are a few:

- Be truthful, even when it hurts.
- By representing our ancestors.
- By showing the upcoming generations how our ancestors lived.
- By simply being, through the stories we create with others in the present and by retelling those of the past.
- Through art, literature, and communication.
- By stopping the "white-washing" of history by institutions and political leaders.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

6. Enduring understandings

The project's outcomes reveal critical lessons for those seeking to engage in similar initiatives:

1. **Collaboration is essential**—Partnering with Native institutions ensures that projects remain centered on, and lead by, Indigenous perspectives and voices.

2. **Emotional support is crucial**—Engaging with historical trauma requires careful facilitation and counseling support.

3. **Flexibility in methodology**—Allowing students to shape their engagement with archival materials fosters a deeper connection to the work and ensures authentic re-presentation.

4. **Public engagement strengthens impact**—Creating spaces for dialogue between Native and non-Native audiences fosters broader understanding and advocacy.

By addressing historical absences, contextualizing boarding schools, and fostering Indigenous agency, this project serves as a model for decolonizing archival practices and amplifying Native voices within public humanities research.

7. Reflections and broader implications

This project exemplifies the potential of public humanities research by engaging diverse publics in reflecting on heritage, traditions, and history, and underscoring the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of civic and cultural life. By facilitating Native American students' reinterpretation of archival materials, a structural pathway for the inclusion of marginalized voices in institutional histories is created. The project's interdisciplinary approach and emphasis on public engagement offer a model for similar initiatives in other contexts, contributing to a more equitable representation of diverse people and histories.

The exhibition generated by this project, created from original source documents, forms a bridge and brings complex, meaningful, and at times seemingly overwhelming issues from their falsely situated position in the distant past to a critical and contemporary place for public engagement. By acknowledging the contexts for silence, absence, and the perception of distance, this project facilitates awareness of issues that continue to significantly impact Indigenous people and communities while simultaneously promoting cultural recognition and self-determination.

This project demonstrates the power of interdisciplinary collaboration in re-presenting Native American histories within academic and public spheres. As institutions continue to address historical inequities, interdisciplinary public humanities projects play a crucial role in shaping a more inclusive and reflective landscape.

Anna Reich is a visual artist and Associate Professor at Augustana University. Her research investigates memory, identity, and landscape and her work has been exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad. She has received numerous grants including a travel grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Art, a Fulbright Fellowship, an Artist as Activist Research Grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, the Humanities for the Public Good Grant and the Sustaining Good Grant both from the Council for Independent Colleges, and the Jane and Charles

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Zaloudek Faculty Research Fellowship. Her book, *I Try Not to Think of Afghanistan*, is published by Cornell University Press.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: A.R.

Acknowledgments. This project was made possible through the support of colleagues, community members, and cultural institutions committed to a more inclusive and accurate historical record. I am deeply grateful to the faculty, staff, and students of FIC for their generous and enthusiastic support of this work. AU, the CWS, and The WP granted access to historical materials, offered critical insights, and contributed valuable time and expertise—thank you for your ongoing support. Special thanks to Dr. Carolyn Ly-Donovan, Elizabeth Cisar, Cody Henrichs, and Jana Anderson for your collaboration and openness throughout this process. I am especially grateful to David Flammond, Zonya Tantype, and the Flandreau Indian School All Nations Student Council, who generously shared their time, knowledge, and stories. This work exists because of your strength, insight, and commitment to critically engaging the historical record and contributing to its public re-presentation.

References

Blue Cloud Abbey Collection. 1870–2004. American Indian Culture Research Center. Archival Collection. Accessed February 15, 2023.

Bradley, Elizabeth B. 1910–1922, 1953. *Elizabeth B. Bradley Papers*. South Dakota Episcopal Diocese Archives, 1 Folder/2 Scrapbooks. Accessed February 15, 2023.

Council of Independent Colleges. n.d. "Public Humanities Projects." *CIC*. https://cic.edu/opportunity/public-humanities/. Accessed May 20, 2025.

First Nations Information Governance Centre. 2020. *The Path to First Nations Information Governance: The Fundamentals of OCAP®*. FNIGC. https://fnigc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/5776c4ee9387f966e6771aa93a04f389_ocap_path_to_fn_information_governance_en_final.pdf. Accessed May 20, 2025.

First Nations Information Governance Centre. n.d. *OCAP® Online Training*. https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/. Accessed May 20, 2025.

"Flandreau Indian School History." n.d. Flandreau Indian School Chaplaincy. www.fischaplaincy.com/school-history. Accessed May 20, 2025.

"Harold Shunk Collection." 1861–1987. Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior. Archival Collection, 51 Boxes. Accessed February 15, 2023.

South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations. n.d. "The Nine Tribes of South Dakota." State of South Dakota. https://sdtribalrelations.sd.gov/tribes/nine-tribes.aspx. Accessed May 20, 2025.

Transformative Reuse: Inviting Artists into the Archives. 2018. Panel Session by Ann Hanlon and Linnea Anderson, Upper Midwest Digital Collections Conference, November 8–9, 2018, Minneapolis, MN. Attended by Liz Cisar.

U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. n.d. *School Listing and Profiles: Appendix A & B*. U.S. Department of the Interior. https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/appendix_a_b_school_listing_profiles_508.pdf. Accessed May 20, 2025.

Cite this article: Reich, Anna. 2025. "Re-Presenting Native Americans in South Dakota's Archival History: A Public Humanities Project." *Public Humanities*, 1, e113, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10032