***Building Resilient Anthropology Collections in a Time of Disasters***

Podcast transcript for the AAA Raising our Voices online meetings in November 2020

Hosted by Celia Emmelhainz and Diana Marsh

Guest experts: Melissa Stoner and Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira

**Celia Emmelhainz:**

Welcome to our podcast for the American Anthropological Association, Building resilient anthropology collections in a time of disasters. My name is Celia Emmelhainz and I'm the anthropology librarian at the University of California, Berkeley.

My colleagues and I are excited to talk with you today about library, archive, and museum collections, the risks they face, and the ways that we can strengthen them through collaboration. The backstory that sparked our interest is this: in 2018, 37,000 books at Brazil's Francisca Keller library of anthropology were lost in a fire along with the manuscripts, films, and other unique field records at Brazil's National Museum, which lost about 80% of its collections.

While the fire was caused, in part, by years of public underinvestment, the disaster captured the attention of anthropologists globally. How had we not known about the risks to this collection, and what else could we have done?

In this podcast, we bring together scholars from libraries, archives, and museums to talk about how social and environmental disasters can affect our discipline's collections, and how we might collaborate in order to better preserve our community and disciplinary heritage.

**Diana Marsh (minute 01:08):**

Celia and I come at this work from libraries and archives, and in my case, also in museums, as well as our shared experience on *The Council for the Preservation of Anthropological Records* (CoPAR).

We're just thinking about how to link and make accessible distributed anthropological collections in the digital age. Our new website is at <http://copar.umd.edu>, where you can find resources, and a guide to anthropological field notes and manuscripts in archives around the world by name of the anthropologist, as well as a directory of global anthropological archives.

So we have two guests here with us today who will introduce themselves momentarily, and we're all, collectively, have worked with lots of different institutions that collect and curate and preserve our cultural and scholarly heritage.

We want to discuss how we can better prepare with and support each other across institutional and national boundaries... before the next disaster happens. So let's get started.

So I'm Diana Marsh. I'm newly an assistant professor of archives and digital curation at the University of Maryland's College of Information Studies, iSchool. I'm beaming in from the traditional lands of the Piscataway and the Nacotchtank and their Indigenous kin and neighbors, that the University of Maryland sits on and that I'm sitting on here in my dining room.

I’m coming at this from a previous experience at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, the American Philosophical Society and its museum and library, as well as the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives.

I've had a range of experiences, especially in Indigenous collections, but I also did my doctoral research at The National Museum of Natural History, the new David H. Koch Hall of Fossils–Deep Time. So I've thought a little bit about the global histories of climate change and disaster and extinction in the ways that I looked at that exhibit. That's me.

**Celia Emmelhainz (02:59):**

As I mentioned before, my name is Celia Emmelhainz. I currently work as the anthropology librarian at the University of California, Berkeley, and I have previously worked as a research data librarian helping scholars to manage their research records and share and save them in appropriate ways. I also previously worked in Kazakhstan at Nazarbayev University, which gave me more of a global perspective on some of the issues facing institutions that handle anthropological collections.

**Melissa Stoner (03:25):**

Yá'át'ééh, shí éí ya Melissa Stoner yinishyé. Ha wa hwana nishłin Tó Dích’íi’nii Báshíshchíín. Diné asdzááni nishłe [needs edited!]. Hello, my name is Melissa Stoner. I am from the Diné Nation and I am the Native American Studies librarian at the Ethnic Studies library at UC Berkeley.

I want to recognize that the University of California, Berkeley sits on the territory of Xučyun, the ancestral and unceded land of the Chochenyo speaking Ohlone people, the successors of the sovereign Verona Band of Alameda County. This land was, and continues to be, of great importance to the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe and their familial descendants of the Verona Band.

I am from the Dine Nation, the Navajo Nation, I've worked with a lot of digital collections. I've worked with the National Digital Newspaper project when I worked at UNLV, and I worked on a oral history project for World War II. I love going out into the community and speaking with community members and getting all these awesome stories.

We do have a lot of collections at our Ethnic Studies library, I think one of the main ones that really does include Indigenous collections in our library is the California Indian Library Collection, which we also call CILC, and that has a lot of manuscripts and photographs and recordings, and I think this is a really awesome resource for the community. I'm really excited to be here today, thank you.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (04:48):**

Hello everybody, my name is Thiago da Costa Oliveira. Thanks Diana and Celia for the invitation for this talk, I really much appreciate discussion you open with this issue of the AAA podcast.

So I'm a social anthropologist, Masters- and PhD-wise, with an undergrad in history. I did my PhD in social anthropology in Brazil at the National Museum that burned down, you just mentioned. I also worked in the heritage field at the Brazilian Museum, the Indian Museum, also in Rio de Janeiro between 2012 and 2019.

Now I am a postdoc researcher at the Geological Museum and Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin. I have basically been working with ethnographic collections of objects, image, both photograph and digital, sounds, maps, and other forms of archives. That has been done collaboratively with Native people from diverse regions in Brazil since 2011. Now we're work... These collections are kind of boundary objects to talk about other things like territory, technology, art, and other kind of stuff.

**Celia Emmelhainz (06:08):**

 So our next question for everybody would be what got you interested in this topic of anthropology collections and how they're handled and managed?

**Diana Marsh (06:16):**

I got interested in the ways that the public interfaces with collections. I started as a BFA in visual art, actually, and was interested in how you actually experience different things in galleries, and got interested in how institutions communicate with the public and with Indigenous communities.

And I started thinking aboutm what are the barriers to that access? What are the barriers to information for people who aren't in our really nerdy fields and who don't know how to navigate these things?

 So I've become really interested in the loss and separation of collections and how to reunite collections with communities, especially in the wake of language loss and many other historical and political genocidal histories, and how to think about ways that we can more ethically reconnect and provide access to those things and collections. And that's the gnarly problem that I'm trying to think about in an iSchool context.

**Celia Emmelhainz (07:18):**

I'd say I really first got interested in this issue of anthropology collections when I was in grad school. I studied with Cynthia Werner at Texas A&M University and I was in her little spare office. So there were these filing cabinets full of her old field records from when she had first gone out into the field as an anthropologist.

And to me there was this question of who's going to manage these things? Where will they go when she retires? How will that information be passed out in a meaningful way? Or will it be lost and it won't be available to the communities it came from, and won't be available to future scholars? Which really does happen with a lot of anthropological field materials.

So I became interested in that, and then when I moved into libraries, I worked with Lisa Cliggett at the University of Kentucky to try and digitize materials from Africa [Zambia], and see how these could be a digital archive, if there were ways that these could be shared online.

And we found a lot of technological and logistical issues and challenges in trying to make that work, trying to set up a standalone website. And we started to say, "Okay, we need something broader. We need something like CoPAR, we need repositories and things that cross boundaries" because, for one scholar to set up their own digital archive, that's just too much! But we do feel a responsibility to have these things be available to communities and to future generations.

**Melissa Stoner (08:25):**

When I first started working at UNLV, they didn't have a huge anthropological collection. A lot of what we were working with was more on the history of Nevada, I guess more of the historical side of it. I think what really...

When I accepted the position at the Ethnic Studies Library as the Native American Studies Librarian, this was really, honestly my first encounter with anthropological manuscripts and photographs. It was really amazing, but also one of the things, coming from the background that I have, is: access.

So I think what really interests me about this field is the access around that and how we can provide that ethically, and also providing transparent... you know, the relationship between communities and institutions. And I think that's what really has me interested in collections like this, is how the institution works with the community and how they're able to... If they're able to build that partnership.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (09:28):**

Yes, in 2011 I was working as a photographer for the Indian Museum and approached a commissioner to document the ritual life of the Kayapo people, the ones Terence Turner has studied along his life.

Throughout this project, I started to understand how powerful was their object life, how proud they were about their culture, and the material dimensions of it. I was in the field photographing these things, and what surprised me was that they have no interest in the collections in the museum, at all. They have the great interest in using the museum to pursue their own goals. Through this collaborative project, they made the museum buy [[[plants?]]] to them for making objects to use in rituals, and then the museum would re-buy these objects for its collections.

 It was astonishing to see how the museum institution can have the power of helping people to live the way they want to live, to pursue their own goals in their lives. It's kind of a different approach to collections that I learned with the Kayapo people.

At this time I was also starting my PhD fieldwork in another region in Brazil and I planned to bring the same kind of museum-supported approach to the people I was working with, the Baniwa people from the Upper Rio Negro.

Then, I started to photograph objects and copy other kinds of archives to bring to these people, and discuss how they understood those things. It finally evolved into a group of Baniwa going to the Indian Museum and a group of women renewing their local association in order to regain the knowledge necessary to produce pottery with the help of the museum.

So it was very beautiful to see these museum collections being used as a kind of ancestral knowledge condensed in the form of artifacts. It was like this field experience that really make me interested in this topic and how museums can be something really, really alive. Something that is really, really connected to the life of people.

**Diana Marsh (11:59):**

What, for each of you, what communities need access to these collections? Thiago, you were just talking about some communities you've worked with. So who needs these things and what barriers are they encountering?

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (12:12):**

From my perspective, I'm working mostly with Amazonian communities, mostly from the Brazilian Amazonia, actually. The kind of access they want and they need, is the access to the museum as this kind of political actor that can make them heard and that can put them on the map of the people in the world. So I think it's not a specific kind of collections, it's much more like the institution that can enhance their power in this complicated world which is Brazil.

**Diana Marsh (12:48):**

And how about you, Melissa?

**Melissa Stoner (12:50):**

I think more so the needing access, I feel like Indigenous communities need to be encouraged by institutions to steward their own collections and not have to dance around access of items that do belong to them.

So I think starting with access, yes definitely at first and making sure that access is really what the community would prefer. It's really not so much like... Well, yes communities need access and they need transparency, but I think more so it's relationship building and partnership.

**Diana Marsh (13:29):**

One thing I feel like we should talk about in response to that, Melissa, which is really interesting, is that I think one of the premises of this idea of the kind of universalist institution, the ultimate colonial museum or colonial archives, is that it collects everything in one place.

And that was seen as the best way to do things, and maybe the safest way to do things. In the British Museum's case, we are the British Museum and therefore, we're the best place to hold these things, and also, for everyone to come here and see them.

I do think that some of the recent events, including the National Museum's fire, have called into question some of those assumptions about what it means to have everything in one place. This idea of having the one ultimate holder of all collections and how maybe distributed ownership, which is how things started, is a model to go back to. I don't know what you think of that, but...

**Melissa Stoner (14:21):**

I think it's definitely a model to go back to. I think, as humans, we do like to collect things, we do like to hoard things.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (14:30):**

One of the greatest concerns I have when I see this kind of situation, like what happened in the Brazilian National Museum, and what I see in other anthropological archives, is that sometimes these collections are not only far from people, but they are kind of abandoned.

That puts me the question of for whom, and why were these collections assembled? And what's the proposal...

Like, as you said, Diana, if you go to the British Museum, it's kind of a black box to enter in the collection side. Can you enter there? Is it possible to know everything that's stored there and how is it stored?

Do we have transparency, as Melissa said about this process? And how preserved are these things and to whom they are preserved?

So I really think that transparency is a very important point, I really think that the presence of people in these institutions, like of the so-called source communities, which is a term that I really, kind of don't like.

The presence of the interested people in these collections is very, very relevant for making these things alive for the present time, and to tell to the conservators and managers: this is not how it should be preserved.

So we need people's presence in museum in order to be responsible with these collections.

**Celia Emmelhainz (16:08):**

There were a couple of interesting presentations at last year's American Anthropological Association meetings: one called *The Lifecycle of a Career Research Record* and the other one *Reconciling the Archive*. Those were led by Canadian anthropologists, people who work with archeological and anthropological records in Canada, and especially with Indigenous materials.

One of the things they focused on was the issue of the archive being accessible to researchers within that community, and it actually being accessible to average people. So if everybody's living in the city, but the tribal archive is way out in Northern Canada, it's not actually accessible.

So you've got these kind of dual interests of how do we make sure that materials are in the hands of not just scholars, but in the community itself.

**Celia Emmelhainz (16:47):**

One of the other questions we had was to dig in a little bit more deeply about how the institutions that you might have worked with have been affected by loss, and what that means?

**Melissa Stoner (16:57):**

I think a really basic example of that would be of a digital record getting deleted or the oral histories that we were working on just completely... The hard-drive just getting completely corrupted and it's gone, or just the portal that you're building... but I see that as one answer to the question.

I think another answer to that is, and looking at it deeper, would be a loss for whom? A loss for the community? Because I have heard of communities that were coerced to give up their culturally sensitive items because they were not able to steward them, you know... and to the community that is a loss.

I think that, again, it goes back to partnership, it goes back to how we define loss and how we keep the accountability. That's the question I'm putting out there, as well, as an answer to this question!

**Diana Marsh (17:54):**

Yeah, I think that's great. Also there's a lovely short piece that was featured in Anthropology News by Marge Bruchac about an exhibit she and I worked on together. She was our Native advisor for a show on Thomas Jefferson and language collecting at the American Philosophical Society.

And there's this sort of iconic story of Jefferson, throughout his life, had amassed this first comparative collection of Indigenous languages which were sort of column A's [gestures as if fill out a chart]. Like, here's all the different vocabularies, and here it is in all these different languages. It was trying to found this early field of linguistics which, of course, had really problematic presumptions embedded in it. [laughs] But it's sort of touted as this important early linguistic project...

And, as Jefferson was leaving the Presidency, he was robbed. His carriage was robbed and these documents were thrown into the river... And so they were fished out of the river and there's about 20 some odd left.

The conservators, I think in the 1920's, coated these documents with silk which turns out now, from a conservators perspective, not to have been the best thing to do, but it was what they thought at the time was the best way to preserve these kind of tattered documents.

So there's these very charismatic, very beautiful documents and we were featuring these in this exhibit, and thinking, "Oh, we're telling this story of the loss."

And Marge was kind of like: "Okay, fine. The immensity of that loss, fine, but loss for whom? Because, really, this is the Western collecting project that you lost."

The loss is the assimilationist policies that Jefferson promoted and helped put into place, and helped to be the architect of, right? The loss is really the speakers, the languages and the speakers who were affected by those policies, the tragic loss is not this guy who thought this crate was probably full of--papers heavy, so he probably thought it was sellable stuff and it wasn't. [laughs]

But I think that's a really important point, so this idea of: to whom is there a loss and how do we think about loss is really important, and what's the lens through which we're looking at that is so key. It's important not to over-romanticize some of these losses because we're coming at it from this Western idea of what that is.

**Celia Emmelhainz (20:19):**

I think what both Melissa and Diana are speaking, to me, also jumps out as importance of maintenance and investment. We don't have material objects that have meaning to us in a cultural way, whether they're field notes or things that you can hold in your hands, unless somebody's taking care of them.

Whether it's curation in the mind or whether it's curation on paper, I think you see that when people start talking about all the work that goes into updating file formats, or all the work that goes into the silk that's put on conserving and preserving these papers.

That, maybe, goes back a little bit into what happened at the Museu Nacional in Brazil, that there wasn't this investment... That people start thinking investment isn't important. Yet, without that, things don't just continue to exist in the world.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (20:59):**

I would just say that part this kind of obvious loss of collections like the one that suffered the National Museum, and also this idea of there's no connections between museums and the source community, the community that are interested... Which is like the kind of loss that most strikes me.

I think that collections are, not only related to the past, to describe things that happened, but also connected to the future. So when you lose a collection, you also lose the possibility of work with it for generations and generations, and to give it many different meanings and senses over history.

So, in the case of the National Museum, what made me cry in the day of the burning down of the building, was thinking that not only we were losing the greatest and oldest collection of our Indian people... it was also that we were losing in four hours works that could be done in 400 centuries or 4000 years, because it's just infinite, the possibility of working with these things.

When we don't relate, when we don't make the case of importance of this collections to society, what we lose is much more the possibilities of working and giving sense to these collections.

**Melissa Stoner (22:34):**

I really like what you said, Thiago, about making the case of showing that these archives are important. I really like that point there because, to me, it kind of brought up the idea of: what do we as a society consider sacred? What do we consider important and what should be saved? There are all these really deep questions to be asked about archives, and to be asked about the materials that we worked with. Yeah, that was one of those deep questions that jumped out.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (23:00):**

In the case of the Amazonian collections, for example, it's real important for me to try to show people how they are connected. For example, now to the environmental issue: so we have objects that are made out of raw materials that are dispersed in a territory, and this territory is known for people over 2000 years.

These people have a deep, deep knowledge of these things and we look to these objects, and we kind of just see a basketry, just a pottery, but we don't get the sense of the things that are in the chain of production of this thing.

When we start to show people this kind of stuff, they start to look at these things differently. So this is one of the examples of how to show the relevance of these collections to people, and to connect it to other issues that are more meaningful to present.

**Celia Emmelhainz (24:01):**

Maybe this conversation we've been having about the future value of collections ties into one of the other questions that we had. Which was both, what kind of risks you see for collections, and the concerns you have for the future of the anthropology collections.

I'm also thinking about Melissa's comment on communities and the future of these communities, not just this salvage anthropology idea that, "Well, at least we'll save the collections."

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (24:21):**

Totally.

**Melissa Stoner (24:23):**

What are the concerns that I would have for the future of the anthropological collections that I've worked with? Okay, let's see. Looking at this and looking at issues, concerns for the future, I think the concern, and it's always been a big concern for me, has always been access. It's always been making sure that these items are accessible in a way that you don't need a PhD to access them.

I also think the way in which, not only access, not only having ethical access, but also being aware of how these items are, I guess in a sense, if they're still collecting. If there are things that are still being collected, what is happening there? How are we going to build these future collections?

 That's my concern, too, is how are we going to take these new protocols and these new ethical considerations, and build future collections? How are we going to hold ourselves and the institutions accountable? Sorry if I'm answering all my questions with a bigger question, but this is just something that's coming to my mind right now.

**Celia Emmelhainz (25:36):**

After we talk about collections, I'd love you to go back to that comment about accountability and kind of outline the accountabilities you think institutions need to have with these collections.

**Diana Marsh (25:45):**

One thing, jumping off that Melissa, that I think about a lot is, and it ties back into Thiago, your earlier point about what's in all these places. I think, especially having worked at the museum support center in Suitland which is where Smithsonian Natural History and some other Smithsonian units, as we call them, hold their collections off-site. You just see the immense scale of things that are there, the anthropology department having football field size plane hangars of stuff.

And then, in the National Anthropological Archives, there are very few federally funded staff that actually work there. The scope is huge, the number of Indigenous communities represented in those, especially in the archival collections, huge and in the two first... well, for the whole three years that I was there, they were running a collections assessment which, of course, found that much of the collections are not very well described, much of the collections are unprocessed.

And so I'm just thinking about the future of that problem, of the immensity of collecting that is still happening, the 20th century paper problem of just the mass of paper that comes into these collections, you have thousands and thousands of boxes... and how it's one thing to do ethical, collaborative projects with 10 communities and really make those relationships matter and do these projects slowly.

But when you look at the history of colonial collecting and what has ended up in these giant federal repositories, how do you do that? And how do you that ethically? And how do you care for these collections ethically through time is something that I just find worrying, but I don't have an answer to! [laughs]

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (27:19):**

I think we need to establish visiting curatorial programs, like long-term programs. It's just unacceptable that we have many scholarships for many fields of work and we don't have this kind of stuff for curating collections.

It wouldn't be so hard to design a program to invite 10 people a year to stay for a year in a collection, working with the resources and the things that were collected in their communities. We don't look at this as the museum managers and the directors.

We have this approach that we have one person who is responsible for everything, the curator, and this person, he or she, has a budget to make something, but it's just this monstrous world, as you said Diana, of things and how can you properly curate it without giving other people the right to do that.

So I think we truly need this kind of approach, we need to be more insistent in convincing managers and directors that this need to be done. We need long-term relationships with these collections.

The most beautiful works I've seen involving Indigenous communities and collections were works that were developed over 10 or 20 years. It's not like one visit that will make everything make sense. And we need projects that we don't know the goal of the project beforehand! We need to discover on the goal, what to do with these things.

We cannot have this product design feel, like you know what to do already and just go there and do it, because that's kind of using people as resource for the museum.

You can invite someone to go there and add value to the museum collection, and then this person goes out and then you have what's there. There's no connection anymore, so what we need is connection, again.

**Celia Emmelhainz (29:29):**

It sounds like what you're talking about is not just extracting the knowledge of community people, but ensuring long-term continued access.

**Diana Marsh (29:38):**

So I'm gonna go off of what you just said about connection, because I think that one question that ties all of us together is thinking about how do we reconnect collections? Not just to communities, but to each other, because so many collections have been dispersed around the world or around many different repositories.

I know both Melissa and Thiago, you've written about this in different forms, so I'm wondering if you can speak to that.

**Melissa Stoner (30:04):**

So I did some work with Hannah Abelbeck from the Santa Fe Palace of the Governor's Archives, along with Ricky Punzalan who's at the University of Michigan. We actually did a talk at NAISA, which is the Native American Indigenous Studies Association, conference about dispersed collections and about how, even just something as simple as the metadata is making it difficult for Indigenous communities to find those archives.

So part of our discussion was looking at the collections of Chief Manuelito in a museum in Europe, I need to get the name, how Hannah had actually reached out to the digital person there, the digital collections or the metadata person, and tried to correct the record that was online for the metadata. [She was] saying it wasn't just a Navajo man, it was actually Chief Manuelito. And she had not received any feedback, they did not correct the metadata record.

She said this is usually a common thing among museums and holders of anthropological records is that they are usually not so cooperative when it comes to changing metadata or providing the correct metadata so that these collections can be discovered.

I think what really got me interested in this, was the fact that I am Diné, and I do know the history of Chief Manuelito, and I think the photographs that were in this museum would definitely be culturally significant to researchers in my community. So this is where this topic of reconnecting dispersed collections, it gets me excited because I'm a metadata nerd and I do promote discoverability.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (31:49):**

Yeah, going in the same direction about this metadata question: I think one of the greatest challenges we have when connecting collections, is about the knowledge structures that operate in the background, in the foundation of the different institutions we are working with.

So when we talk about ethnographical museums, it's kind of easy because we are talking about the same kind of collections. But for example, I'm working with connecting objects to plant materials in the botanical garden. And when you go to the botanical garden, the knowledge that is behind that structure is another structure of knowledge.

It's a structure according to the Linnean way of describing nature. So you won't go there and find, for example, "I want to know which kind of plants Hobart Schoborg[?] collected" here, as you would go into an ethnographic museum.

And they will say, "Do you know what kind of plants he collected? Because then we can try to find what he collected."

So, how can you connect these kind of institutions and collections if they are so differently structured?

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (33:03):**

I think this is the greatest challenge we have when dealing with these kind of different structures. Going to the nerdy part of the subject, we are developing a project here in Berlin and this project is very motivated to explore the semantic way of connecting things.

So we are trying to create a virtual environment where you can curate these different archives, ethological, natural history archives, but to make it we need to go step behind and describe these things semantically so they can talk between each other without the logic of the archives disrupting the conversations.

That's really hard to do, but we haven't figured out another way to do that. It's really necessary to go to this step of accepting that these collections need to be re-described in order to be connected.

**Celia Emmelhainz (34:06):**

That sounds like you're speaking here about those technical issues of linked data, but also those social issues of what is represented. I remember talking with some anthropologists about how they might be managing their own research data and their response was: "clearly in the metadata, we need to list everybody who's not in the room, everybody who's not represented, everybody who's not present..." and [laughs] it took me aback as a librarian! That was not a question I would've thought to ask.

But those were the kind of questions people were saying was, "If you're describing a thing, can you also hint to what isn't being included there?" Which was a very anthropological question, but again, when you come to Melissa, the things that communities want may again be different from the things that certain brands of scholars want.

**Diana Marsh (34:45):**

A project I did at the National Anthropological Archives was, largely, user studies and I've just finally finished coding a whole lot of interviews I did with community-based users at the American Philosophical Society.

And one constant theme is that, when community based researchers are talking about the stuff that's had this "archival diaspora" that's gone all over the place, they're like, "We want everything. I want everything that's Kiowa, I want everything that's Mohawk, I want everything that's Diné," right?

And as we're pointing out, from an archival, or metadata, or museum perspective, that's a really tough thing to do. I think that's one of those things that all of us are getting nerdy about and trying to figure out, how do you do that? How do you connect collections in different ways that are more intuitive to the users who want access to them?

And I've found it interesting that many repositories have gone back to subject guides, which seem to be a slightly more old-school model of this, but in the digital world actually is really useful...

But of course, it’s limited to the repository that you're talking about. As we know, these collections are all over the world, or maybe they're in botanic gardens, which... I haven't wrapped my head around that yet!

But I do think it's a really exciting time in that, we are starting to have the technologies that allow us to do those things, even if we haven't fully made use of them. So that's kind of a positive future view of the world.

**Celia Emmelhainz (36:09):**

I think we really had one last question here which is about the kinds of collaborations that we'd each like to see in making our collections more resilient and accessible. And I think I'll add back into that Melissa's question about accountability: how do we need these holding institutions to be more accountable?

**Melissa Stoner (36:24):**

Um, let me dust off my soapbox. There is so much that institutions can do to hold themselves accountable.

Hearing Thiago and hearing Diana talk about archives, working at the university has taught me one thing and that is, anthropologists and archeologists love archives. It's just the idea of archives, they love them. I think this needs to be, in a way, harnessed because one of the things that I would like to see the field take accountability is actually maybe to have some kind of coursework that allows you to do fieldwork with archives. Something that will allow you to, not only use archives in the Bancroft or whatever, but archives in a community setting and seeing the care that goes into those archives.

Maybe, hopefully, there might be some type of shift where it would be more of an appreciation than just trying to hoard it, or preserve it for future researchers and anthropologists, but really benefiting the community [now].

I think another thing when you're looking at accountability, like I said before, transparency is a huge thing for me. Knowing what is going on with the ancestors that are in the museum, knowing what's going on with the archives that have the songs of my ancestors on it. Are those being put online?

So it's just really developing that relationship and making sure that, if the relationship is jaded in some way, you're going above and beyond to make that relationship manageable, and at least making a attempt to undo those wrongs. That's huge for me, it's all about relationship building.

One of the things, too, would also be what I say when I meet with tribal institutions, is just asking the communities what is your process around take down policy? How do we know we are going to get an answer? Because there are so many institutions out there that have take down policies, and a tribal member will put in a request and they'll check it online and the item's taken down.

But yet there is no recourse around that, around whether are we going to meet with somebody? Are we going to talk about why it was taken down? Or did they just take it down?

So there needs to be communication in that area, not just with our institution I work at, but with a lot of other institutions.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (38:34):**

We have already said a lot about collaboration with communities, I think this is really central and we need to come back to this.

We need, as I said, long-term collaboration projects and long-term budgets for collaboration projects because, at least in Brazil, it's kind of expensive to bring someone from a remote Amazonian village to a metropolitan setting and to give the conditions to these people to stay there comfortably and to have at the museum the proper environment for this kind of collaboration.

Which means not working from [inaudible 00:39:21] lists, for example, but allowing people to go into the storage to search the collection by themselves, this kind of stuff.

We need this collaboration that will challenge the way museums are organized, challenge the way things were settled after the knowledge was structured.

We need collaborations that challenge this divides this isolated homes where objects can reign, like geological museums. This isolated home where plants are the kings, like the botanical gardens and the isolated home where documents reign, the archives.

We need collaborations that looks to these things and points to the necessary connections between those things, and not only... of course, it's very important to, as I think Diana said, to know where are all the collections made in the Upper Rio Negro or in the Upper Xingu river, or from people from everywhere in the world.

But also, we need to question the fact that it's not only the ethnographic collection that's at stake for this communities, it's other kind of collections, as well. There's the connections between these collections because this diaspora affects many layers of knowledge.

So, if you look to Brazil, to the Amazonian situation, in the 19th century you had the trading of collecting Amazon and you have dozens of expeditions that were bio-collecting, bio cultural collecting took place. The set was the same, so Indigenous people were enslaved in order to give these explorers access to these kind of resources, and they were brought to metropolitan museums.

They were separated in different institutions and you don't connect, you think when you talk about colonialists today, you talk mostly about the benign case or the many cases of appropriation of things.

But we don't connect it to the appropriation of other resources that was happening at the same time, in the same setting, with the enslavement of the same people.

That's like, "Why? Why don't we look at this with the same lens?" For example, maps are the route to resources, that later became products in the world economy.

We don't connect it to the bio-collecting... we need to make the case that shows that all those things are connected, and connected to inequalities. We need collaborations that shows this kind of stuff: that museums are part of this history, and they use museum archives to point to today's inequalities.

**Diana Marsh (42:22):**

One program that I think is something that could be replicated, and maybe expanded to longer time periods, is the Recovering Voices program at the National Museum of Natural History.

The reason I thought of it was there was a group, the Wauja Indigenous community, came for a visit, and when they came, they were asking to see botanical and bird specimens and other things to look at the history of ecological devastation in their communities, as well as to look at language materials or other media.

I think these kinds of programs illustrate exactly that, Thiago, which is that, one role we can all play is to try to educate our colleagues who are in these other fields that haven't yet understood what decolonizing methodologies are, haven't thought through some of the implications of the collections that they have, and to try to help broaden all of our knowledge about that.

To think more critically about the collections that are stewarded that sometimes the folks in vertebrate zoology haven't thought through that yet, and what those implications are, and I think that's a positive thing that we can all work toward.

**Celia Emmelhainz (43:28):**

I think your point about inequality, Thiago, is also really important because, so often when we use a word like collaboration, it just sounds like, "Oh, we're all going to work together and everything will be fine."

And that's not the reality on the ground. Different people have vastly different amounts of power over these collections, or ability to fundraise foundations and get more resources, and that means that you have vastly different preservation and access regimes in different places around the world.

Moving forward, I would love to see those of us at powerful institutions, those of us in the first world, be able to direct more resources towards other communities and other collections, not just... it's already a big enough job, like Diana said, to even curate our own. Yet, we need so much more.

We can't just be focused on America's museums or America's university libraries and archives, and be ignoring what's going on at Museu Nacional because, as we saw, when there's that disinvestment locally, but also a lack of support internationally, crucial pieces of what communities need end up being lost.

So I'd love to see more collaboration in the future between people at different institutions, in terms of making these collections accessible.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (44:36):**

That's a good point that remembers my visit to the Smithsonian. I was, like, shocked with all the structure of preserving things. I was wondering about, how could we be more, as you said, more careful in transferring the knowledge necessary to implement this kind of protocol, to produce the materials necessary to store things appropriately.

I remember talking with Barbara Watanabe in the Smithsonian and she was telling, "Oh this kind of tissue endures the fire, it retards the fire. If you have a fire here, it will make the fire not consume the things immediately."

I was wondering: how could we enhance this kind of industry in Brazil, how can we have the protocols, the necessary protocols to exchange this kind of knowledge and the access to this kind of... and this is urgent because you only have this kind of resources develop with work, it's true.

You don't have the company that will make the storage boxes like the one you have in the Smithsonian, in Brazil--the paper that's necessary to store things inside the box.

We need the institutions in developing countries to think about it as programs, as interchange programs. We need collaboration in curatorship, but we also need collaboration in exchanging this kind of knowledge on conservation in order to keep the things preserved because it's not easy.

You need to adapt a lot of things when you are in a country like Brazil and you are responsible and accountable for your institution. Like in the Indian museum where I used to work, we had all these different solutions to make this work in Brazilian standards. International standards with Brazilian companies giving us the materials. This collaboration between institutions is very, very important.

**Celia Emmelhainz (46:45):**

And not just knowledge exchange, but also resources, right?

Because people can have all the knowledge, and if they don't have access to the resources...

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (46:52):**

And this has to do with taxes, for example. If you need to reduce... Yeah, it's true. Like for you to import things from the US to Brazil, you pay two times the price of the thing.

That makes things difficult, that's a big battle to make a field of material go with a different law regarding taxes. So we need institutional support to make this happen.

**Celia Emmelhainz (47:19):**

In your dream world, if everything was as you would like to see it be, briefly what would that look like?

**Melissa Stoner (47:25):**

[laughs]. Sorry, I'm laughing! Communities would be stewards of their own materials. That would be a huge thing for me.

There would be funding and support for communities to be stewards of their own materials, and for institutions to admit that they were wrong when they are wrong.

It sounds simple, but it's really not. In my dream institution... in my dream world, or archival world, that is what I would want.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (47:56):**

I think that the world where Indigenous people are considered fully subjects, is my dream world.

I think about this Angela Davis quote: "When a black woman moves, the whole society moves together."

 I think when a Indigenous person moves, it's the whole world, the earth, that moves together and we go to another perspective on everything.

When you consider these people as a person, as a subject, and you enter their points of views, you really need to rethink everything. This is the kind of world I would like to be living in.

**Diana Marsh (48:41):**

I think we should end on that note.

**Melissa Stoner (48:43):**

Yeah, that was great. Oh, wow.

**Diana Marsh (48:47):**

Well, thank you everyone for joining us, and I'd especially like to thank Celia for her initiative to create this panel. It's been a really wonderful experience to talk with our colleagues and to hear different perspectives on this topic.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (49:07):**

Thank you, Diana and Celia, for having us here.

**Melissa Stoner (49:08):**

I just want to say Ahéhee’ to the moderators for putting this together. It's really great to meet you, Thiago, and like you said, I really hope we have more conversations.

**Diana Marsh (49:18):**

Yeah, thank you guys both so much. This was great.

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (49:24):**

Maybe we should have been recording everything to have, like, the laughing. [laughter]

**Diana Marsh (49:29):**

All right, everyone laugh. We'll just have a laugh track.

**Celia Emmelhainz (49:33):**

I am not going to be inserting canned laughter in between every comment!

**Diana Marsh (49:40):**

Hold on, I'm going to get one of these on recording. [Sounds of birds and a cow from an American children's toy] [group laughter]

**Celia Emmelhainz (49:49):**

Thank you guys again, this has been a lot of fun to do. Our first podcast. Okay.

**Diana Marsh (49:57):**

Yay, okay. Well...

**Thiago Lopes da Costa Oliveira (49:59):**

Well, bye.

**Melissa Stoner (50:01):**

Bye!