

SEVEN

The Unexpected Afterlives of Himalayan Collections: From Data Cemetery to Web Portal

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Reassembly Requires Assembly

Every time we use the word “real” analytically, as opposed to colloquially, we undermine the project of digital anthropology, fetishizing pre-digital culture as a site of retained authenticity.

—Horst and Miller (2012: 13)

In addressing the themes of afterlives and reassemblage, this contribution on the Digital Himalaya Project¹—and the collections it has gathered, protected, and connected—engages with the visualities and assemblages that precede it.² After all, there would have been nothing to reassemble, return, or reanimate had an earlier generation of scholars not been so committed to the process of fieldwork-based collection. As Laurel Kendall notes, “multiple domains of afterlife inform this retracing” (this volume).

Reassembly requires assembly. Only through our understanding of the analogue moment of collection can the digital afterlife of historical objects have meaning. Understanding the complexity of what happens when ethnographic materials are dispersed in physical or virtual form requires an appreciation of the documentary moment of original collection, or “registration.” Such an appreciation does not mitigate the brutally extractive practices in which many colonial-era ethnographers engaged, nor do I argue that all afterlives are necessarily digital (see Bell, this volume, for a related discussion). My point is rather to recall

that materials collected in ethically dubious circumstances can—sometimes—have surprisingly rich and engaging rebirths. And as such, this contribution is as much about material heritage as it is about heritage material. Horst and Miller propose that the digital “itself intensifies the dialectical nature of culture” (2012: 3). We might consider whether contemporary processes of repatriation and digital return can in some manner compensate for the defects of the original context of collection.

This contribution focuses on two collecting expeditions, or more correctly collectors, since their expeditions were ongoing and cumulative. Frederick Williamson and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf were both active from the 1930s on, the former in his capacity as a colonial servant of the British Empire, the latter as a prolific ethnographer. Both Williamson and von Fürer-Haimendorf lived and worked through the last great classificatory era of colonial exploration and expansion, and both were skilled users of visual recording media to document the peoples and cultures they encountered.

Williamson and von Fürer-Haimendorf were also part of what Erik Mueggler (this volume) has referred to (in relation to Joseph Rock), as the “wandering generation,” men who left home to explore other ways of life abroad. Unlike Rock, however, neither Williamson nor von Fürer-Haimendorf were rootless or *deraciné*. Rather they were the products of colonial expansion and war, as comfortable at high table in Cambridge or attending the opera in Vienna as they were conducting fieldwork along the northern borders of the Himalayan range. Their personal diaries and publications make it clear that neither Williamson nor von Fürer-Haimendorf found themselves struggling on “the extremities of ... experience [that] can force the ethnographer to come to terms with himself,” an internal conflict common for adventurer-scholars in this era (Kuklick, this volume). This may be in part because both Williamson and von Fürer-Haimendorf were part of an emergent “anthropological-administrative network” (Elliott, this volume), which witnessed colonial servants and researchers returning in successive waves to the same locations and recording different versions of the same individual (whether king or commoner) over time.

The Birth of an Afterlife

Over a decade ago, in December 2000, together with the historical anthropologists Alan Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison and cultural anthro-

pologist Sara Shneiderman, I established the Digital Himalaya Project at the University of Cambridge as a pilot online portal for ethnographic materials collected in the early to mid-twentieth century. The project grew out of a realization that hundreds of reels of 16mm film and thousands of photographs and field notebooks generated through expeditions to Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and northern India from the 1930s on had been consigned to deep storage on their return to Europe, little known and often poorly catalogued. Intriguingly, while many of the collectors whose materials we hoped to work with had been technologically innovative in the field, the multimodal nature of their fieldwork was not reflected in the dissemination strategies of the time. Returning home, scholars were expected to produce textual monographs for review and promotion, while their audio-visual collections were stored in a haphazard manner based on the format of the recording medium.

Some of the impetus for the emergence of Digital Himalaya as a collaborative, multi-sited research project in virtual space had to do with the steady repositioning of (particularly Western) institutions as custodians of collections held in trust, rather than as the owners of the cultures and histories of others. This realignment coincided with a growing democratization of archival space. Online repositories were quickly becoming adept in what Greg Rawlings has referred to as the “aesthetics of the subtle” (2011: 462), negotiating the often competing interests of preservation and access that pull in opposite directions. At the turn of the millennium, archives were being effectively rebranded as sites of interaction and impact, as much about outreach as preservation. Archives, the public was told, were no longer musty places where objects go to die and into which scholars deposited their work at the end of their careers, but were active spaces for inquiry and exploration. As a case in point, the British National Archives, not an organization popularly known for galvanizing youth interest, used the phrase “Bringing history to life through UK government records” as the strapline on its homepage for much of 2010.

These conceptual shifts were already under way in 2000 when we started to develop online collection, storage, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. The plan was simple enough, and the timing appeared to be right: many archival ethnographic materials, such as 16mm films, still photographs, videos, sound recordings, field notes, maps, and rare journals were fast degenerating in their current formats and were in urgent need of reha-

bilitation. As scholars who worked in Nepal, Tibet, and northern India, we logically focused our attention on the Himalayan region and made use of the unique collections to which we had access through archives in Cambridge, Oxford, and London.

The Führer

We digitized two important collections in the first phase of the project. The largest was an archive of over seventy hours of 16mm footage in black and white and color, shot between the 1939 and the 1970s by Christoph von Führer-Haimendorf (1909–1995), who had given his entire film collection to Alan Macfarlane before his death simply because his own university expressed little interest in curating it. The “Führer,” as he was affectionately known by many of his contemporaries, and to whom Mark Elliott refers in his contribution in this volume, was born and educated in Austria, gaining a PhD in anthropology from the University of Vienna in 1931. A grant from the Rockefeller Foundation then enabled him to study at the London School of Economics, under Malinowski. In 1936 he went to the Naga Hills in northeast India for his first period of fieldwork, and over the following four decades, he worked extensively in South, Central, and Northeast India, and later in Nepal.

When interned as an enemy alien in the state of Hyderabad during World War II, von Führer-Haimendorf was given free rein to practice his trade as an anthropologist within the defined geographical limits of British India. After the war, he returned to Europe, and in 1950 he was appointed professor of anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. During his long career, he published seventeen books, most of them ethnographies of tribal cultures, and took more than 20,000 still photographs. He did not have a 16mm camera on his first expedition to the Naga Hills in 1936–37, but he made up for it by shooting film for the rest of his long and impressive career. Although he served as president of the Royal Anthropological Institute from 1975 to 1977, von Führer-Haimendorf has only more recently been appreciated for his pioneering work in the field of visual anthropology.

Despite being born a baron, Christoph von Führer-Haimendorf was not a man of inexhaustible means. His passion for ethnographic fieldwork among indigenous people in Asia was an expensive calling, and travel, supplies, and equipment all had to be funded. Early in his career,

von Furer-Haimendorf had shown himself to be an excellent photographer, capturing visual records of the lives of tribal communities in India on both negative film and positive slides. Making use of this visual aptitude, he devised an ingenious way to fund his expeditions to India and Nepal, a skill learned during his “research internment” in India during the war. In the 1940s, von Furer-Haimendorf had struck up a relationship with the Nizam of Hyderabad, who supplied the expensive film stock that he used to document the Chenchu and other communities. After the war, the BBC, along with Austrian and Bavarian television, were looking to commission ethnographic films to quench the seemingly inexhaustible appetite of television audiences for romantic ethnographic travelogues but lacked the resources and access permissions to make the films themselves.

The solution was a creative and mutually beneficial arrangement: the television company would provide the film stock and cover some of the costs of travels and fieldwork, while von Furer-Haimendorf would act as their contracted and embedded filmmaker, shooting cine with the steady hand and good eye for which he was already known. On his return to Europe, he delivered the reels to the commissioning body, which then, through a process of cutting and editing, would composite the raw footage into dramatic-sounding documentaries with titles such as “The Men Who Hunted Heads” and “The Land of the Gurkhas.” In the meantime, as all academics do, von Furer-Haimendorf wrote his books. In this, I wish to convey not that he was a reluctant filmmaker, but rather that he was a somewhat accidental and practical one, incorporating the additional apparatus of a cine camera into his already rich documentary arsenal because of what it permitted him to do and out of a sincere interest in the affordances of this relatively new medium.³

The Furer’s Films: Highly Visible and Yet Highly Marginal

That von Furer-Haimendorf filmed at all—let alone so much—already went against the anthropological grain at the time that he was working, and his use of technology incurred snide comments from colleagues. Some may have been jealous of his success: he was a regular feature on British television, with none other than a young David Attenborough—already a rising star among presenters—lending his voice to the televised

adventures and even interviewing von Furer-Haimendorf and his wife, Betty, in live studio sessions. When Kuklick asks, “how did the field-going scientist come to be defined as a hero?” (this volume), in the case of von Furer-Haimendorf at least, we may answer that the BBC certainly helped.⁴

When von Furer-Haimendorf mentioned to Bronislaw Malinowski in 1935 that he intended to photograph in the field, the grandfather of ethnography dismissed this as “Thomas Cook-ism,” a form of “tourist activity, below the dignity of an anthropologist and of only decorative use” (Macfarlane 2010: 379). In his autobiography, written many years later, von Furer-Haimendorf describes this trivialization with characteristic tact but “widened the range of those who held such a view” (Macfarlane 2010: 379). “Apart from his brilliance Malinowski had surprising prejudices,” writes von Furer-Haimendorf; “he and his followers looked down on anthropological photography and considered any visual documentation unnecessary and not worthy of serious academics” (1990: 9). Film was simply not considered to be an appropriate or valuable documentary tool for ethnography.

In this, university-based social anthropology in Britain contrasts to practices in American museums of the same era, which did, as Ira Jacknis notes (this volume), incorporate films into gallery exhibits in experimental productions as early as 1928 (see also Griffiths 2002). Although in this volume Jacknis argues that film footage “was intended to be used for scientific documentation and for popular education in the form of auditorium lectures ... there is little evidence that it was ever used for research,” there were divergences from this model. Mead and Bateson’s work in Bali during the 1930s offers an early example of still and moving images being folded into a research agenda, even if it took time to see the results through into publication (see Jacknis 1988 and Sullivan 1999 for more information).⁵

The arrangement with the BBC continued throughout von Furer-Haimendorf’s career: the corporation funded a portion of his fieldwork, and he collected excellent raw footage. The BBC made its films from his ingredients, while he wrote his books. Although his works have remained in print—and are still available in Indian editions to this day—the films, as happens so often with visual media, quickly disappeared. The BBC has never kept a comprehensive archive of its broadcast history, in either analogue or digital form, and only began to safeguard its productions from the mid-1970s on. More worrying is the fact that, during the editing process, BBC producers regularly mixed up ethnic

groups from different districts (and even countries), laid a Beethoven soundtrack over footage of Himalayan rice paddies, added an authoritative Attenborough voiceover, and then aired the finished “documentary” to public acclaim.

Having been broadcast, the film was spent, and no strategy existed for what to do with either the positive or negative 16mm prints. Not only were the reels heavy, but they were also combustible, and their copyright and intellectual property status remained problematic and unclear. Did the BBC own the footage because they (and indirectly the taxpayer) had paid for it, or did the corporation have restricted rights to the final edits only? For whatever reason, the finished films as well as the rushes—the raw footage from which the edited films were composited—ended up in a cupboard in von Furer-Haimendorf’s house in London. The cupboard was home to over seventy hours of 16mm footage, starting with his first surviving reel, entitled simply “On the Boat, 1939.”

Alan Macfarlane was one of von Furer-Haimendorf’s last graduate students in London, and he went on to teach anthropology at Cambridge. Visiting the Haimendorfs on one occasion in London in 1984, Macfarlane asked what was to become of the 16mm film footage that was languishing in their cupboard. This treasure trove, he reasoned, was on the cusp of being swept away, and with it the most complete visual record of many tribal cultures from India, Nepal, the Philippines, and Mexico. Macfarlane was convinced that the recordings would make an exceptional resource for research and had untapped potential for teaching.

Von Furer-Haimendorf was delighted that someone was finally interested in the collection, and his wife was relieved to be rid of these bulky films and to reclaim her wardrobe. At von Furer-Haimendorf’s urging, Macfarlane made a number of trips to London by car and took all of the films back to Cambridge. The plan was to protect the collection for posterity, make it available for teaching and research purposes, and eventually, if possible, share it with members of the communities who were featured in the films, as their descendants might one day want access to the visual records of their ancestors. Macfarlane wrote to von Furer-Haimendorf to outline the process of transcoding and migrating the films to ensure that the archive was safeguarded and rendered accessible in the future. On July 16, 1985, von Furer-Haimendorf replied: “The miracle of the technology you use to preserve visual and written data still puzzles me, and I also wonder whether in hundreds of years anybody will



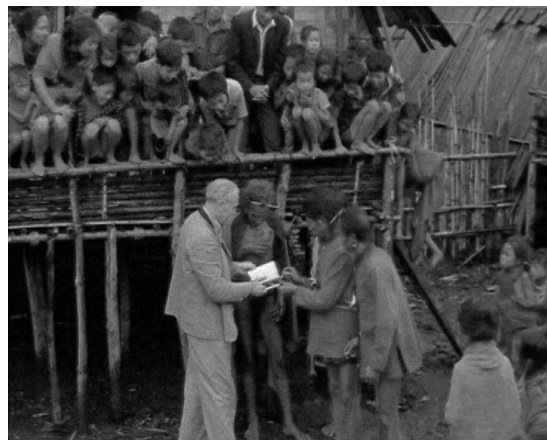
Fig. 1. Betty and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, Still captured from 16mm film, ca. 1950s in India. Photo from the Digital Himalaya Project archive.

be interested in my films, slides and diaries, but I suppose the Sumerians would have been equally amazed if anybody had told them that 3,000 years later people would excavate and decipher their clay tablets.”⁶

Filming “against the grain” of contemporary anthropological regimes of value, von Furer-Haimendorf was aware that his archive of still and moving images, despite doing little for his academic prestige at the time, might prove useful in the future. Not only did his visual records connect anthropology and the ethnographic method to a wider audience through the broadcast medium, but they were also a lasting visual archive of the communities whom he had visited and studied. Despite his focus on the visual, von Furer-Haimendorf rarely emerges from behind the camera. There are only a handful of photos of him in the field—whether moving or still—and rather more of his wife, who accompanied him on all expeditions (fig. 1). On later trips, when von Furer-Haimendorf returned to the Nagas, the Apa Tanis, and many of Nepal’s ethnic communities, he brought with him not only copies of his books and reproductions of photographs but also duplicates of his early fieldwork cine footage (fig. 2). He used these visual tools as fieldwork aides and appears to have taken genuine pleasure in the delight with which his writings, photographs, and films were received. As early as the 1960s, von Furer-Haimendorf was engaging in a process that is now familiar to so many curators of contemporary ethnographic museums: “return.”

Most of von Furer-Haimendorf’s contemporaries viewed him as an un-reconstructed colonial scholar, unencumbered by anthropological theory

Fig. 2. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf with members of the Apa Tani community studying his 1962 book "Apa Tanis and Their Neighbours," ca. 1970, in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Photo from the Digital Himalaya Project archive.



and the winds of change that were sweeping the discipline. More recently, however, he has been appreciated for engaging in work that was more relevant and transformative than was widely acknowledged at the time. The monographs of his contemporaries are mostly out of print and rarely used for teaching, and only then as historical vignettes into the fleeting nature of anthropological theory. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's books, on the other hand, are still widely available across Asia; his photographs are the focus of many dissertations and large collaborative research grants (as the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, in Cambridge, and at Columbia); and his films—now that they have been digitized and made available online—are of growing interest to the descendants of the communities whose cultures he had the privilege of documenting, as well as to scholars of visual media and historians of anthropology.

In later life, von Fürer-Haimendorf embraced his public image of scientific explorer "at large," charting and locating communities worthy of study for the next generation of anthropologists who would invest in long-term fieldwork with the peoples whom he had visited. He also had an increasing belief in the "diminishing marginal returns" school of documentation: a modest but critical amount of relevant social information could be gleaned from a stay of a few weeks in a community, after which he would pass the reins to one of his many doctoral students. In this, he had something in common with the adventurer Berthold Laufer, whom Laurel Kendall describes so vividly in this volume.

The Political Officer in Sikkim

The second important historical collection that became the focus of the first phase of the Digital Himalaya Project comprised the films and photographs of Frederick Williamson, a British political officer stationed in Sikkim, India, in the 1930s. During his posting, Williamson made a series of expeditions to Bhutan and Tibet, where he later died. Williamson was an ardent photographer: between December 1930 and August 1935, he and his wife, Margaret (or Peggy as she was known), took approximately 1,700 photographs throughout the Himalayan region. As well as documenting the Williamsons' personal travels, the photos provide an unusually well-preserved and impressively catalogued insight into upper-class social life in Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet in the 1930s. Since Williamson had studied at Cambridge University, Peggy donated the complete visual archive of their work and travels in the Himalayan region to the university's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) after his death.

As Mark Elliott has noted, the Cambridge museum is home to a large number of unexplored treasures. Just as Marguerite Milward's sculptures were only accidentally rediscovered half a century after they were accessioned when museum staff happened to clear out a "behind-the-scenes corridor that had formerly been exhibition space" (this volume), so too Frederick Williamson's twenty-three reels of 16mm cine film were only recently brought to light as a result of renewed curatorial interest in visual records and frequent requests from patrons about the Williamson collection. While Milward's "heads had been hidden in an Edwardian vitrine that contained a display of Asian textiles" (Elliott, this volume), Williamson's films had been concealed from both public and curatorial gaze in excellent temperature-controlled conditions, along with his original printed photo catalogues. The obscurity of this important collection of early Himalayan film—some of the first moving footage recorded in Bhutan and Tibet—can in part be attributed to the medium: British ethnographic museums do not commonly have large film collections nor much experience with curating and exhibiting cine. Although the films had been accepted as a gift from Williamson's widow, the reels had likely not been played after accessioning. In the same way that Elliott describes the Cambridge museum as not having a tradition of "employing 'art'" (this volume); it had little experience of 16mm film, and there was no established protocol for its use in teaching, research, or public exhibits.



Fig. 3. Frederick Williamson behind the tripod with camera in hand, photographed by Margaret Williamson in Sandakphu, Sikkim, India, May 16, 1934. Photo copyright Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, ID: P.97304.WIL.

Frederick Williamson shared von Fürer-Haimendorf's interest in visual recording media, which in the 1930s were still experimental and costly. He had what might these days be referred to as a "film habit," as he spent most of his personal stipend and a considerable amount of the imperial budget on sourcing and then developing the cine reels through film houses in Calcutta (fig. 3). Unlike von Fürer-Haimendorf, however, Williamson was not a skilled camera operator nor was he a trained anthropologist. The cine hardware that he used in the early 1930s was more rudimentary and heavier than the apparatus taken to the field by von Fürer-Haimendorf at the end of the decade, but Williamson's choice of subject matter for his expensive filming was dominated by ludicrous egg-and-spoon races and games of musical chairs that showed British colonial officials in formal attire competing with ornately

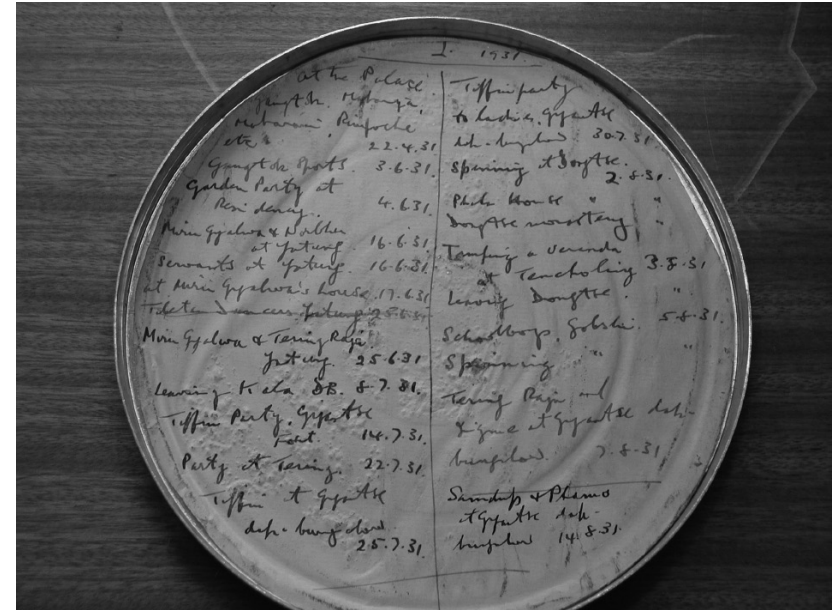


Fig. 4. One of the Williamson's 16mm cine reel cases from 1931. Photo from the Digital Himalaya Project archive.

dressed local nobility. There is a pleasing incongruity in noting that Haimendorf, an Austrian baron and consumer of high art in Europe, felt so comfortable living with and documenting the lives of remote communities across South Asia, whereas Williamson, a middle-class administrator, spent his colonial service recording the great and the good in the last Himalayan kingdoms.

Alongside the footage of Brits and Tibetans besting one another in public displays of colonial gaming, Williamson's collection contains a few cultural and historical gems. There is rare footage just outside of Lhasa of the Tibetan army involved in military exercises using British armaments; there are films documenting the Williamsons' expeditions to Bhutan and interactions with the country's royal family; and there are many hours of footage in and around the official residence in Gangtok, Sikkim. Additional context and location of both von Fürer-Haimendorf and Williamson's films can be derived from their field notes, diaries, and their better-documented still photographs. Then, as now, "tagging"

moving film and providing appropriate levels of “metadata” were difficult. Our best window into Williamson’s collection is the handwritten “sleeve notes” on each 16mm reel that date and locate every short sequence of film (fig. 4).

The Devil in the Digital

The historical arc of the visual—moving from the invention of photography and film to electronic production and dissemination of images—now intersects the historical arc of the digital—moving from the invention of computers, to the internet and to participation in social media by large parts of the world.

—Wexler 2012

For budgetary reasons, we digitized the von Furer-Haimendorf and Williamson films ourselves, projecting the footage and filming the output through a box of mirrors known as a SONY Film Chain Adaptor, and then we hosted highly compressed clips of digitized video on our Web site. These snippets caught the attention of the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), which then funded the redigitization of most of the footage using professional telecine projection. It was clear that digitization should be thought of as an iterative and ongoing process, and not as a one-off intervention. In the late 1990s, institutions with large holdings, such as the British Library, were starting to digitize a subset of a collection before committing to scan the entirety, for reasons of time and cost.

Susan Whitfield, director of the International Dunhuang Project, is as skeptical about the digital turn as she is an advocate for its transformative power. Too often, she believes, libraries and museums “do not consider whether to computerise but only when” falling into the trap of “providing an alternative means of doing what was already being done” (2001). Digitization, when poorly conceived and rashly executed, is not only time consuming and expensive (in terms of labor and hardware), but it also requires considerable physical space, additional resources, and a commitment to regular migration, and, most worryingly, it may even prove to be of little long-term use. Whitfield’s key concern was that making a collection digital does not necessarily add any value in and of itself.

As the Digital Himalaya Project came on stream and online, we noticed an apparent paradox. Even though anthropologists were ever more interested in the impacts of globalization and rapid socioeconomic change on small-scale societies, and funding was available for scholars to work in partnership with Indigenous communities to document their cultures and languages, relatively few social scientists were working to ensure that ethnographic collections from previous generations were maintained, refreshed, and made accessible, whether to the research community or to the descendants of the people from whom the materials had been collected.

Through Digital Himalaya, we aimed to make digital resources available over broadband Internet connections for researchers and students and focus on returning copies to communities in the countries of origin on hard disc or DVD. When setting the project in motion in 2000, we had somewhat naively imagined that users in the West would be downloading the content from the Internet while “the Rest” would be accessing the collections on DVDs and CD-ROMs. That naive assumption has been thoroughly overturned over the last few years, with more than half of the online user comments and digital submissions to Digital Himalaya coming from Nepal, Bhutan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, and the Himalayan regions of India.

Whether a digital archive is online or on DVD, issues of confidentiality and consent remain central to its construction. We were quickly engaged in the complex web of ethical and practical questions surrounding the circulation of archival content and historical documents and their return to the communities and contexts in which they were recorded. Anthropologists need no reminding of the need to obtain appropriate levels of consent from their interlocutors, but the potential pitfalls are more acute when dealing with the immediacy and lack of anonymity inherent in visual representations. In the case of much of the material that made its way online through Digital Himalaya, the footage was taken generations ago when the mass distribution of visual content as we now experience it was completely inconceivable.

Writing about the Digital Himalaya Project, Georgina Drew notes that “the project navigates ethical dilemmas” (2012: 681) and “raises some complicated questions” (2012: 682). The issues to which she refers are by no means clear-cut, and we still have no rule book. Before hosting any material online, we returned to the communities from which the records had been collected and—to the extent possible—met with descendants of

filmed subjects or the relevant local authorities, whether in Nepal, India, Bhutan, or cultural Tibet. Drew is supportive of this approach, in which we were careful to gauge the appropriateness of our interventions: “the core team involved has been highly attentive to the ethics and potential repercussions of disseminating sensitive cultural information” (2012: 681).

Yet troubling questions remain. Putting aside for a moment discussions of coercion and the unequal power dynamics of the anthropological endeavor itself, early anthropologists may have believed that the people they filmed and photographed agreed to the activity. The advent of the digital age fractures the very basis of any consent that may have existed. When Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf started his fieldwork in Nepal in the 1950s, the country had just opened to the outside world for the first time in a century. How could his informants have agreed to their images being hosted on a Cambridge mainframe half a century later? How could they have anticipated that the words they uttered (gossip about their neighbors, political criticism of elites) might be available to millions of faceless viewers across the world? Simply put, von Furer-Haimendorf was not and could never have been in a position to ask his *Naked Nagas* (as his famous book was entitled) whether they objected to being hosted on the World Wide Web.

Although many of the individuals represented in the early films have long since died, we had to consider what would happen when their descendants searched through a digital archive and found their grandparents taking part in some compromising activity or making statements still embarrassing to the family? How can anyone know how his or her image will be manipulated in a week’s time, let alone over the next ten years? As we were beginning to discover through our work, old film doesn’t die; it is rather clipped into ever-smaller pieces and Tweeted, rehosted, and posted on YouTube, and further removed from the moment of its original registration.

Reflections on Reanimation and Reassembly

Reassembly is not a one-off or time-bound moment but is predicated on a procedural engagement with a collection. Reassemblages have layers, and these connections and resonances become uncovered only through the reliving. As the faces behind the Digital Himalaya Project, we were perceived to be agents in the rehabilitation of previously inaccessible ethno-

graphic records, disseminating old collections to a global public of digital consumers. Some colleagues in the discipline viewed us as salvage ethnographers of salvage ethnography: collecting legacy materials, protecting them through digitization, and broadcasting them online and on disc. And, we were learning, some of these “objects” appeared to become “documents” through the process of digitization, taking on levels of authenticity, authority, and credibility that had escaped them in analogue form.

At best, reviewers have noted that “Digital Himalaya helps to show not only the history of a region and its people but also the inner workings of the ethnographic process, including its lessons and missteps” (Drew 2012: 682), with the result that the “collections provide a unique array of culturally-enlightening digital resources on the Himalayan region” (Larivee 2013). But archives are significantly more complex when the “documents” in question are representations of human “subjects,” as was the case for the ethnographic collections with which we were working. The challenge we faced was how to structure, build, and then maintain a public digital archive that contained hundreds of hours of film and thousands of photographs representing numerous individuals spanning an eighty-year time period in a part of the world where digital media was just beginning to take hold in 2000. How might we integrate into an online portal the often-conflicting intentions of all the individuals involved in the life of an ethnographic document—subject, collector, and archivist, as well as the descendants of the subject and collector—and, at the same time, honor the culturally embedded history of each document and catalogue it in a consistent manner?

Annelise Riles describes documents as “paradigmatic artifacts of modern knowledge practices” (2006: 2), but we may question how strictly modern they really are. What of the palm leaf manuscripts produced, distributed, and consumed across large tracts of Asia as far back as the fifteenth century BCE—examples of early mobile archives, Kindles of an earlier era—that recorded historical and mythical occurrences in the ancient world? Perhaps the documents that Digital Himalaya was hosting could be thought of as “cultural texts” (Riles 2006: 12), in the sense of their cultural embeddedness in a physical landscape where they had been produced and into which they were being digitally reintroduced, never mind the cultural context provided by our disciplinary frame of reference.

Discussing the film collections of McCormick and Goddard, Jacknis (this volume) notes that “most of their footage has not survived the ravages of time,” a common and regrettable case with collections from the

interwar period.⁷ Archivists specializing in the curation of moving image have used the phrase “nitrate won’t wait” to describe the urgency of migrating silver nitrate film to more durable digital formats. But not only are the ethnographic collections that date from the early twentieth century fast degrading; they are also becoming orphaned, as the technology needed to view them becomes obsolete and the people needed to contextualize the contents and make sense of them become harder to find.

While it has “long been a central canon of museum philosophy that fossilized collections die” (Mayhew 2006: 87), there has not been an equal recognition that many recordings made by previous generations of fieldworkers are now critically endangered, and that they risk becoming unusable when their collectors die or when they are fragmented into their component parts based on recording medium. Although the politically motivated destruction of documents is much discussed by scholars working on classified archives from the Cold War, the more pervasive and apparently more passive wholesale destruction of documents through simple neglect and inaction concerned us much more in the context of Digital Himalaya. Even if a physical document endured—a single negative or snippet of audio recording—it would be situationally barren and devoid of ethnographic resonance without some context and frame.

Moore’s law on the exponential rate of technological change in computing provides a powerful if brutal lesson in impermanence and non-attachment to external form. It remains entirely possible to read a book that is five hundred years old (as many scholars of classical languages regularly do), but in 2000 it was already close to impossible to find a computer anywhere within the University of Cambridge that could read an “old” 8- or 5/14-inch floppy disc dating back to the 1980s. The rate of innovation and the pace of obsolescence were moving ever faster, and few ethnographers had paused to reflect on the longevity and persistence of their recordings when they embarked on fieldwork. The curious challenge of online collections was that they appeared to exist everywhere and nowhere, at once infinitely replicable (and thus seemingly safe), yet tragically fragile if not backed up or regularly migrated.

And yet, while “audio-visual” had become a technology buzzword in the 1990s, ethnographic fieldwork had really been “multimedia” or “multimodal” for close to one hundred years, with early anthropologists using still cameras or wax or plastic cylinder record phonographs along with pen and paper to document their experiences. When these scholars returned home, however, they were expected to write books in which

precious little of the material that they had recorded could be accommodated. And when anthropologists retired and later passed away, their collections of recordings and photographs might be left in shoe boxes in their attic and later donated to university libraries and archives that often did not really want them and rarely had time to catalogue them, let alone see them used for teaching and research.⁸

So while fieldwork was inherently immersive and had long conscripted all manner of equipment as documentary apparatus, an anthropologist’s holistic collection risked being split apart when the researcher returned home, with its location to be determined by the format of the recording medium: field notes were donated to the library, as they were “texts”; sound recordings were lodged with audio archives; photographs were deposited with image collections; and cine film was regularly left stranded and even unclaimed as it straddled categories and was difficult and expensive to curate. In exploring “the different regimes of value through which materials have passed,” Bell in his contribution to this volume notes a very similar pattern in the way museums and institutions divided collections along disciplinary lines, often in accordance with personal interests and sometimes even “by accident.” For some collections, the fast-developing Web of the early years of the twenty-first century offered a creative site for diverse media and materials to be recombined and reintegrated and served up in a searchable and retrievable multimedia format, re-creating—perhaps for the first time—something of the holistic fieldwork experience for both the observer and the observed.

Returning to Riles, who reflects on Heimer’s assumption that “documents strip away context” (2006: 9), we found that an online archive provided a way to recontextualize and rediscover context that had been more difficult in non-digital documents. Through this digital repository of ethnographic recordings and by providing new ways to access previously inaccessible and uncatalogued “documents,” the Digital Himalaya Project team members were becoming actors in objects’ lives and complicit in their dissemination to a wider public.

Collaboration and Digital Return

Thanks to the von Furer-Haimendorf and Williamson film collections, previously unexpected collaborations began to take place. The custodians of such collections back in the United Kingdom often had only

limited knowledge about the footage that they held, based on a few quickly scribbled notes on a film canister or on an ancient accession form. Back in the Himalayan region, descendants of the individuals who were featured in the films often had no way of knowing that such footage even existed in European collections. Once these communities were approached about the existence of these visual records, many were eager to view them and then have permanent access to copies of the films and photographs of their ancestors. Relationships of trust began to develop out of a process that has since come to be referred to as “digital return” (see Bell, Christen, and Turin 2013).

Community members can become revalued as knowledge holders and experts in collaborations that are mediated through visual records. Through practices of digital return, new partnerships have emerged, as the insights offered by community members are often of great value, contributing additional information and context to historically underdocumented collections (see Peers and Brown 2003 for a discussion of the forms that relationships between museums and source communities can take). For Digital Himalaya, the process of engaging with source communities through DVDs and hard discs packed with historical footage, and later through online interactions, was more than a routine process of cultural return in digital form. Rather, it fast became an exciting opportunity for collaboration through which collections were enriched and better understood. Such recalibrations can be read in various ways—including as a form of mediated “decolonization”—and dovetailed with emerging global discussions about the space and impact of Indigenous (new) media (see Wilson, Stewart, and Córdova 2008).

Through Digital Himalaya, we revisited Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet with digitized footage. Having discussed the process with descendants of the people whom we could identify from the recordings, we provided copies to institutions, universities, and colleges in the region that had a stake in the content. Many then reincorporated these materials into a deepening understanding of their own past. In the Mustang district of Nepal, community members from Lubra organized repeated DVD screenings of a short film clip from the 1960s that featured a wedding ritual and a disagreement in their village. The mixed and changing emotions that this film evoked are documented in Shneiderman and Turin (2003). In Sikkim, staff and researchers at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology organized a series of public screening for historians and journalists, and they accessioned copies of Williamson’s films in their

library catalogue. In addition, in January 2003, Khendzong Yapla (former secretary to the government of Sikkim and local cultural historian) and his mother, Mrs. Yapla, viewed Williamson’s footage and were able to identify a large number of relatives and locations, all of which were noted with time codes and returned to the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

In December 2004, members of the Digital Himalaya Project team visited Bhutan. With the support of journalists and academics, we organized a series of screenings of Williamson’s Bhutan reels in hotels and colleges. These events were attended by local historians, scholars, and members of Bhutan’s royal family, all of whom were able to identify locations and individuals. Bhutanese film makers immediately asked to incorporate clips from the digitized historical footage into their own documentaries. Similarly, at Tibet University in Lhasa, we screened the entire Williamson film archive from the 1930s and worked collaboratively with local historians to identify and locate the individuals and events depicted with some degree of precision. In each case, multiple copies of the digitized films were left in country, in different formats and playable on different media, in the hope that at least one of the copies would endure. Robson, Treadwell, and Gosden have observed that documents that appear historic to us may be living “cultural items” of considerable importance to communities. As the Digital Himalaya Project team was discovering by returning footage to the region, “artefacts from the distant past are key to cultivating a sense of self and community in the present” (Robson, Treadwell, and Gosden 2006: xv; but see also Clifford 1997; Edwards 2001; and Peers and Brown 2003).

Through such interactions and partnerships—online and in the field—we learned about the uneven and sometimes surprising valence of our collections. “The essential ambiguity of digital culture” relates to its ability to be open at the same time as closed, and this emerges “in matters ranging from politics and privacy to the authenticity of ambivalence” (Horst and Miller 2012: 4). On one occasion, footage taken by Frederick Williamson of the Tibetan army involved in a training exercise in 1932, proudly flying the flag of an independent Tibet, appeared to us to be extremely sensitive, but it did not have the local power or resonance within contemporary Tibet that those of us managing the archive had anticipated. Writing that “no presents are as much appreciated as firearms” (personal field notes, Cambridge University), Williamson persuaded the government of India to provide him with thirty rifles

and six thousand rounds of ammunition as gifts. To our surprise, access to this footage remains open from inside the Great Chinese Firewall, even though the authorities were well aware of the project, and users across the Tibetan Autonomous Region continue to have untrammelled access to download the films. At the same time, the BBC Web site remained restricted and blocked to all Web users in China. How and by what means did the passage of history depoliticize some documents but repoliticize others?

We like to think of each cultural object or artifact as having its own life history—a unique trajectory through time and space—but the voices of individual documents have a tendency to be flattened by the anonymity of large archives (or constantly reshaped by changing sociopolitical contexts; see Appadurai 1986). In some cases, the sheer number of documents—analogue and digital—can reduce a unique image, audio file, or artifact to one in a series, a point of unaffiliated data. Similarly, the individuals involved in a document's life may be left by the wayside when a document becomes assimilated into an archive: subject, collector/artist, and interpreter can be collapsed into notes in the margin (see Bell, this volume, for a related discussion concerning the 1928 USDA New Guinea Sugarcane Expedition). Yet at the same time, a well-structured and multi-modal archive can help to situate a document in relation to its peers, involving new actors in its future life as an artifact of study: researcher, commentator, community member, and public.

Analogue recordings and field documents can be protected from the fate of obsolescence by ensuring that they are properly digitized, catalogued, contextualized, and valued as meaningful representations of individual cultural expressions, life histories, and social memory. Most importantly, those who featured in such collections must be involved in the process. Only then will we be on the way to creating an appropriate ethnographic archive for the digital age. Meeting these goals requires a constant process of engagement with the form of our documents and the communities from which they originate (see Bell, Christen, and Turin 2013 for a detailed discussion of these processes). Such partnerships require us to think of an open, nonlinear archival structure that offers a range of access points and paths for different audiences to meet their diverse expectations. Each step needs careful consideration to ensure that initiatives such as Digital Himalaya, and the many similar projects active around the world today, serve to remember and reflect the past, and yet remain culturally responsive resources for the future.

Of Bits and Bytes

The multimedia capabilities, storage capacity and communication tools offered by information technology provide new opportunities to preserve and revitalize Indigenous cultures and languages, and to repatriate material back to communities from national cultural institutions.

—Dyson, Hendricks and Grant 2007: xvi

In their framing of the conference from which this edited collection derives, Hasinoff and Bell (this volume) note that in the past “dreams of totality” had been “the rationality of most field collecting endeavors.” Encyclopedic ethnographic expeditions that set out to gather everything in their path are no longer current in the discipline of anthropology, but the model of the interdisciplinary expedition endures, particularly in the field of natural history.⁹ The appetite for French scholarly tradition of interdisciplinary area studies—predicated on multiyear, data-rich academic explorations—appears undiminished. “Our Planet Reviewed: Expedition Papua New Guinea 2012–2014” includes both a “Land-based mission” and a “Marine mission” through which international scholars “assisted by Papuan guides, researchers, technicians, amateur naturalists and students from 21 different countries will gather as many specimens and as much data as they can.”¹⁰ Similarly, in the social sciences, research staff at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) launched Brahmaputra Studies, an ongoing project to “study a variety of human groups in a complex geographic, ethnological, and linguistic situation [*sic*].”¹¹ Initiated in 2007, Brahmaputra Studies involves “collecting and analysing ... data essential for the understanding of societies and their interactions,” a mission—in concept at least—not so far removed from the agendas of many of our scholarly ancestors a century ago.

But academic practice has indeed changed, and so too have the expectations of the people with whom we work. When Horst and Miller (2012: 3) propose that “humanity is not one iota more mediated by the rise of the digital,” their position seems predicated on a very narrow reading of what constitutes *mediation*. Horst and Miller attribute a meaning to mediation that is almost exclusively negative, pitting themselves “in resolute opposition to all approaches that imply that becoming digital has either

rendered us less human, less authentic or more mediated” (2012: 4). The “approaches” against which they rail are straw men, certainly within critical social science, and the windmills they fight have ceased to turn. Whereas terminological battles involving dictionary definitions are the regrettable low-hanging fruit of contemporary scholarship, my reading of *mediation* has far less to do with dilution and much more to do with agency, conveyance, and access. To that end, I see the affordances of the Web—and the new digital media that its emergence has facilitated—as transformative, changing not only the conditions of access to earlier ethnographic collections but also the social relations that underlie them. This transformation is not always positive, nor is it always equitable. And open access does not mean free access, but it usually does mean better access.

Similarly, and by extension, this position views “new technology as a loss of authentic sociality” (Horst and Miller 2012: 12), rather than as a series of protocols and tools that can help engender new forms of sociality through wider engagement and participation. In terms of ethnographic materials, the analogue (at least as retained and curated in museums and in private collections) is at no risk of disappearing. Any remaining nostalgia for the analogue is an indulgence only afforded by those who benefited from an earlier era when they had privileged levels of access. Such entitlements were maintained through one’s physical proximity to a collection, by holding a passport that made international travel and visa requests easy, and through the non-trivial financial resources required to request copies of documents, photographs, or objects. These benefits were not traditionally in the hands of communities that had been subjected to anthropological attention and interest.

We know that digital tools are neither objective nor value-neutral. There is no need to keep deconstructing the “idealized digital futures” of which Bart Barendregt is so critical (2012: 203), nor are there many remaining evangelists for the “transformational qualities of ICT as a universal good and universal concept,” which Jo Tacchi derides (2012: 227). And I remain wary, like Haidy Geismar, of the “glowingly utopic terms” (2012: 270) used to describe the “success” of digitization projects initiated by museums and collecting institutions, and I follow her in understanding the digital not as something that is “brought to culture, facilitating or changing it” but rather as a “cultural object and a cultural process” in its own right (2012: 277).

Yet the digital turn can facilitate the “formation of relationships of trust and cooperation, rather than those of exclusion or superiority” (Scott

2012: 2). This is not tokenism but rather “humanization through the attribution of information and histories to formerly nameless and marginalized peoples” (Scott 2012: 4). Laurel Kendall (this volume) invokes Clifford’s description of the early anthropological expedition as “a sensorium moving through extended space,” accumulating all manner of data along the way. To my mind, Clifford could just as well have been describing the Internet. Writing about science and nature, Jacknis chronicles the process of going “from the macrocosm (the field) to the microcosm (the museum) by means of a visual note” (this volume). The power of the Web lies in our ability to invert this traditional sequence: we can use the “visual note” as a means of retracing our steps from the museum back to the field.

Addressing the mixture of ambivalence and enthusiasm with which indigenous communities have taken up new media technologies, Faye Ginsburg offers a powerful exploration of how and why “concepts such as The Digital Age have taken on a sense of evolutionary inevitability” (2008: 290). The concerns that some voice about “new digital media” and the entanglements of the Internet echo the doubts expressed by earlier generations of anthropologists about the appropriateness of film, as referenced above in relation to von Furer-Haimendorf and his detractors. As Laura Wexler has so convincingly argued, those who doubted and derided the importance of photography when it emerged as a new documentary medium now stand “on the wrong side of history” (2012). “Painting did not die after photography,” as had been predicted, but was rather “changed and rejuvenated” through photography (Wexler 2012: 1). Similarly, the digital provides us with a platform to reassemble the analogue; it allows us to explore new forms of collaboration that are more creative, more subversive, and more equitable, and it offers a framework to integrate different knowledge systems and hierarchies of value, so that we can transform our understandings of lives and afterlives of expedition materials in exciting and generative ways.

NOTES

1. The Web site for the Digital Himalaya Project is www.digitalhimalaya.org, last accessed on October 13, 2014.
2. I am grateful to Dr. Jocelyne Dudding, manager of Photograph Collections at Cambridge University’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, for helping to locate a high-resolution image of Frederick Williamson, and to Hunter Tighe Snyder for his assistance with “screen grabs” of the von Furer-

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3. The important 2013 volume *Recreating First Contact: Expeditions, Anthropology and Popular Culture*, compiled by Gordon, Brown, and Bell, has a number of contributions that explicitly address the nature and practice of early “expeditionary film making.” See the editors’ introduction and chapters by Wintle, Fuhrmann, Bradburd, and van Vuuren in particular for more information and a robust discussion.
4. See Gordon, Brown, and Bell 2013 for a fulsome discussion of these pressures and a nuanced reflection on the visual practices that shaped early expeditionary ethnography.
5. I am grateful to the editors of this volume for pointing me to relevant literature in this regard.
6. Personal correspondence, letter from Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf to Alan Macfarlane, July 16, 1985.
7. See contributions to Gordon, Brown, and Bell 2013 for an in-depth discussion on documentation, preservation, and access.
8. See Brady 1999, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, and MacDougall 2006 for further discussion on collecting practices and the use of recording media in anthropology.
9. I am grateful to the editors for pointing me to current expeditions in the sciences and for drawing my attention to programs such as the Global Genome Initiative led by the National Museum of Natural History, which seeks to preserve and understand the “genomic diversity of life on earth”; <http://www.mnh.si.edu/ggi/index.html>.
10. <http://www.ourplanetreviewed.org/en/134/home>; accessed September 20, 2014.
11. <http://brahmaputra.vjf.cnrs.fr/uk/presentation.htm>; accessed September 20, 2014.

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Afterword

Chris Gosden

Expeditions are an embarrassment in a post-colonial world. Men clad in khaki or furs striding heroically into the unknown, barking orders to a snaking mass of bearers, now seem to embody the arrogance and cultural partiality of all colonial regimes. The terrain they traveled was unknown to them but perfectly understood by their guides, bearers, and local people. Their heroism now looks foolhardy, their travails self-inflicted and to dubious purpose. And there are tropes that contemporary anthropology is desperate to get away from: the discovery mode; the hierarchy of command and control within the expedition; forms of casual racism; the enforced inequality between the explorer and the explored; practices of collection and recording now far from the consensual attempts of the present.

There is considerable tragic-comic truth in this cliché. Partly because of this lingering embarrassment, expeditions have been relatively ignored in the literature on anthropology and museums. Expeditions have also been under-studied for slightly more honorable reasons: by definition they were complex phenomena, involving many human participants, material means, and all sorts of politics, from those of the individuals or institutions that sponsored them, the drives to collect and document, and perhaps most interestingly the subtlety of relationships between the participants, both the expedition teams and the explored. Like all complex aspects of the past, these expeditions have bequeathed complicated legacies to those who deal with the results of expeditions, particularly in engagements between institutions that hold material from exhibitions and the descendants of the people through whom the