



ACTIVATING CULTURAL ARCHIVES FOR MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Photos courtesy of Centre for Advanced Computing, Queen's University

It might seem surprising that the Vulnerable Media Lab (VML) at Queen's University is one of the most intensive users of large-scale storage at the Centre for Advanced Computing (CAC). However, VML digitizes and restores film and video, and when you consider that a film shot in 35-millimetre can run up to 72 frames per second, and each frame becomes a separate .tiff file when the film is digitized, that's a lot of data. To be precise, VML's storage runs to half a billion gigabytes.

But Dr. Susan Lord, director of the VML and a professor at Queen's, says her team relies on the CAC as much for expertise and advice as it does for storage services. "We have learned a lot from working together," she says. Much of that learning comes from pooling knowledge to solve challenges that are unique to the digitization of art and media, especially in the space VML inhabits, where knowledge sovereignty is crucial. VML is the digitization and restoration node of the Archive/Counter Archive project, a collaboration among 14 Canadian universities that is dedicated to "activating and remediating audiovisual archives created by Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), Black communities and People of Colour, women, LGBTQ2+ and immigrant communities."*

As part of Archive/Counter-Archive, VML is working with ARNAIT Video Productions, a women's video collective in Igloolik that for 30 years has been producing documentary and feature films. Queen's holds ARNAIT's archive of 311 videos, of which about one third have been digitized to date. Dr. Lord's team has worked closely with ARNAIT over several years to ensure that the artists' collective and their community maintain control over these valuable cultural materials. This includes control over how the videos are accessed. Some films are widely available on the ARNAIT web site, while others are only accessible to scholars through a research portal set up by Queen's. It also includes control over how the materials are categorized, described and indexed.

"We asked ARNAIT to tell us how they want the works described," Dr. Lord says. Through discussion they arrived at the following process: An affiliate of ARNAIT and a translator sit down with elders in the community and watch the digitized videos, which are sent from Queen's on an iPad with an external hard drive. The elders provide a wealth of descriptive information provoked by the content of the video, all of which is sent back to Queen's. "The data we get from this approach go way beyond things like geographic location," Dr. Lord says. "We receive things like hand-written notes, stories and even drawings." Data librarians and others at Queen's now need to find a way to keep the integrity of this knowledge and use it as metadata. This is ground-breaking work.

Another new challenge is the question of how to preserve "digital-born" artwork. This could be artwork that originates in digital media, such as computer animation, or artwork that combines live and digital elements, such as installations or performance pieces that incorporate augmented or virtual reality. Figuring out how to approach these problems will take ongoing collaboration with computational experts at the CAC, data management experts, artists and scholars. "This is where we're going next and it's really unknown territory," says Dr. Lord. "But I think we've built the collaborative, cross-disciplinary relationships and knowledge-sharing that will be needed to figure this out."



Dr. Susan Lord

*from the Archive/Counter-Archive web site

