

Digitizing Dance Heritage: Community-Driven Innovations at the Cross-Cultural Dance Resources Collections

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Abstract

This presentation examines how the Cross-Cultural Dance Resources (CCDR) Collections at Arizona State University is reimagining its founding mission through the ethical stewardship of the Gertrude Kurath Collection. As one of CCDR's five foundational archives, the Kurath Collection contains extensive documentation of Native American dance, music, and cultural expression from the mid-20th century. Long underutilized, the collection is now at the center of a renewed curatorial effort that seeks to balance accessibility, respect, and community relevance.

Established by Joann Kealiinohomoku, CCDR was envisioned as a "living museum" dedicated to the holistic study of dance in cultural context. Today, housed in a university setting, CCDR Collections at ASU remains committed to this vision while addressing the complexities of stewarding embodied cultural knowledge in archival form. The Kurath digitization project serves as a case study in applying ethical stewardship to archival workflows. Ethical stewardship, as practiced in this project, emphasizes shared authority, cultural care, and the long-term relational responsibilities of the archive. Rather than treating digitization as a purely technical task, the project frames it as an opportunity to reflect on the meanings, origins, and future life of the materials in question.

By focusing on ethical stewardship as a living practice, this presentation contributes to broader conversations in archival studies on how to ethically engage with intangible cultural heritage. It offers practical insights for archivists working to align their institutional missions with community-centered, culturally responsive practices.

About the author:

Shan Chuah is a dance anthropologist and curator whose work explores ancient movement practices in diasporic and transcultural contexts. Her research focuses on the transmission of embodied knowledge through traditions such as Taijiquan and cham, the sacred masked dance of Vajrayana Buddhism. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Canada, India, and Nepal, her methodology integrates embodied inquiry with ethnochoreology to examine how movement sustains memory, cultural continuity, and community well-being.

Shan currently serves as curator of the Cross-Cultural Dance Resources (CCDR) Collections at Arizona State University. Her work centers on ethical stewardship of embodied heritage and the development of community-informed, culturally responsive digital practices. She is particularly interested in how archives can serve as relational spaces for cultural resurgence and interdisciplinary collaboration.

A former gold-medalist Taijiquan instructor and Choreomundus alumna, Shan has performed and taught across Asia, North America, and Europe. She is also the founder of the Choreo Dance Film Festival and editor of Dance Central, a publication on contemporary dance practice in Vancouver. Her broader interests include movement-based archiving and health humanities.