The late ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax coined the term “cultural feedback,” by which he meant reinforcing the world’s diverse expressive traditions and aesthetic systems by a variety of means, including the method of returning documentation to the places, people, and cultures whence it came. How to interpret and implement such an idea is dependent on context. Advances in digital technology make it possible for repositories to cooperate in circulating ethnographic collections, but how do we effect this while honoring our moral and legal obligations to artists and local cultures? Today’s scholars have made great headway in disentangling the many complicated issues facing contemporary researchers, archivists, and curators (as well as indigenous and local peoples) concerning the ownership and management of artifacts and intangible culture. But what are the challenges of engaging in digital repatriation efforts today?

In 2005, the Association for Cultural Equity (ACE—an entity also known as the Alan Lomax Archive) began to repatriate digital copies of sound recordings, photographs, and field notes made by Alan Lomax to repositories in the Caribbean, the U.S., England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, and Italy. At that point, as an archivist with ACE, I was the project manager for this initiative. Today, as a consultant, I continue to manage this repatriation project. When I refer to repatriation in this context, I mean the delivery of digital copies of original archival recordings and visual materials, along with descriptive catalog records. Sites served so far have included:

- Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, Montgomery, Alabama
- Archivio Sonoro della Canzone Napoletana della RAI, Naples, Italy
- Blue Ridge Institute and Museum at Ferrum College, Ferrum, Virginia
- Blues Archive, University of Mississippi Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi
- The English Folk Dance and Song Society, London, England
- Folk Research Center, St. Lucia
- Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana
- Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin, Ireland
- La Médiathèque Caraïbe Bettino Lara, Guadeloupe
- Nevis and St. Kitts Historical Society, Nevis
- The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow, Scotland
- The School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

Future sites to receive repatriated materials include repositories in Cinquefrondi, Italy; Asturias, Spain; St. Barthélemy, Grenada, and Carriacou; several Trinidadian universities; and, most recently, in Haiti, with the support of the Green Family Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Clinton Global Initiative.

ACE’s digital repatriation project is ongoing. It is a model with the potential to stimulate similar
initiatives by other archivists, collectors, and scholars using small archives. This article offers two critical questions and my reflections on them after six years of repatriating digital cultural heritage materials:

1) Is there a spectrum of repatriation methodologies?
2) What have we learned so far?

1. Visualizing the spectrum:

The archives/libraries/museums of the new 21st century are experiencing an era of mass digitization and online distribution. Researchers want access to collections remotely, and communities want access to collections at the touch of a button. Everyone wants access all the time—from their cell phone, to their laptop, to their ipad. So repositories digitize and collect digital content. They host websites to provide access to collections, and researchers come virtually through these sites to repository shelves to hear music, watch movies, read manuscripts, or view images.

The work of digitization for access and preservation results in a cache of digital copies (or digital originals), which repositories now set out to preserve for the indefinite future. Unlike discs, tapes, or original photographs, digital files can be copied many times without either the original or the copies diminishing appreciably in quality. Furthermore, such duplication can be accomplished in seconds, compared to the hours required to copy tapes or develop film. Because of these characteristics of digital files, when disseminating digital content, it no longer matters whether a given file is the first digital copy, or a subsequent one, and there is a relatively low cost associated with making further copies. Therefore, once content is digitized, the content becomes the focus, not the carrier. This reality makes repatriation more realistic for archivists and tremendously increases the options for repositories.

I propose that digitization expands the possibilities of repatriation along a spectrum, which leads from online access (what I call indirect delivery) to active repatriation, which is a collaborative method in which communities of origin are provided with their own copies of digital files. Furthermore, any and all of the possibilities along the spectrum can happen simultaneously, because copies proliferate in digital form.

2. Lessons Learned

The digital repatriation work that is done at ACE is a context-dependent process with no clear rules, so ACE staff members are learning as they go. As a brief conclusion to this article, I would like to share three of

1 http://dloc.com/
the many lessons that I have learned so far:

1) Even though digital technology is advancing at a fast pace, older technology is often better for digital repatriation projects.

In many cases, CDs have been the more useful delivery option than digital files on hard drives for rural communities. Hard drive technology is cheaper, more efficient, and more flexible than optical technology. However, in many of ACE’s Caribbean dissemination sites, CDs have been the optimal method for delivery and access due to a lack of infrastructure to support more advanced technologies.

2) People forget – there is an important temporal element to this work

Continuity is an essential ingredient to repatriation relationships. Acknowledgement and use of the materials is highest when the moment of impact (the time of delivery) is most recent. Five years, ten years down the road, without continued contact with the recipient repositories, repatriated materials will get lost, institutional knowledge in the repository will disappear, and people will forget.

Furthermore, because ACE repatriates digital copies, there is a heightened need to maintain contact for reasons of technical support (if files decay and need to be replaced, formats need migration, etc.). Since recipients know that they do not have the “originals” they may be less diligent in the care of the materials.

3) Finally, repatriation is a necessary act of letting go.

It is important to “let go,” to surrender the intellectual and physical control of the materials being repatriated. Part of the act of repatriation is the willingness to let others determine the meaning and the interpretation of the materials themselves. Recipients may want to provide new life to these collections, new lenses for interpretation. This is a good thing.

Endnotes

1 http://www.culturalequity.org