

Digital Repatriation: A Canadian Perspective

Introduction

The dawn of the 21st Century has been a period of transition in Canadian museology marked by greater public awareness of the concept of Indigenous voice and cultural authority in the representation of past lifeways, increasing concerns over ownership and repatriation of artifacts, and expanding partnerships between museums and Indigenous communities. During this time Canadian museums have struggled to balance their mandate of preserving and sharing material history with the public, with the desire of Indigenous communities to retain and preserve both sacred and secular artifacts from their own material past (Phillips, 14). In the absence of national and international laws concerning repatriation, and with Indigenous cultural artifacts having been widely distributed amongst international museums and private collectors, researchers and Indigenous cultures alike have been increasingly relying on the sharing of digital media to technologically bring together artifacts held by multiple institutions for research purposes (Hogsden and Poulter, 266). The term “digital repatriation” was coined to describe the practice of sharing these digital surrogates with the Indigenous communities from which the artifacts originated.

Although digital repatriation does provide Indigenous communities with an opportunity to explore previously inaccessible elements of their material culture, and to convey in their own voice the story of their past, an uncomfortable power dynamic exists. Indigenous peoples are being called upon to add content and consequently value to collections that remain the property of a culturally dominant other. While such projects claim to provide reciprocal benefits to both Indigenous communities and the cultural heritage and academic institutions that ultimately retain ownership of the artifacts, it can be argued that the relationship is not an equitable one. This essay seeks to examine the benefits and shortcomings of digital

repatriation, and to explore the strategies employed by three Canadian digitization projects: the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), the Knowledge Sharing Database (GKS) of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC), and the Blackfoot Digital Library.

A Brief History of Repatriation in Canada

From the time of first contact to present day, outside cultures have expressed curiosity about the material culture of the Indigenous peoples of North America. This curiosity resulted in the collection, confiscation, trade, and removal of both sacred and secular objects from their communities of origin. Even in instances where transactions were ethically conducted, a lack of documentation makes proving legitimate transfers of ownership difficult (Fisher 2). Many of these cultural items remain in Canadian museum collections, while still more made their way from Canada to the United States as well as Europe, where they are held in the possession of both private and public collectors. The systemic loss of both sacred and secular items, combined with attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples, and the banning of ceremonial practices under the Indian Act resulted in the permanent loss of elements of Indigenous culture and spirituality. Sacred traditions that did survive were kept alive only through the efforts of those willing to defy the laws imposed upon them (Berry and Brink, 64).

In the year 2000 - a full decade after the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was signed into law in the United States - the Government of Alberta introduced the groundbreaking First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (FNSCOPA)(Chari and Lavallee, 29; Fraser, 3). The result of extensive collaboration between the provincial government, Alberta museums, the Blood Tribe, Peigan Nation, and Siksika Nation, this Act called upon museums to repatriate sacred ceremonial objects to their communities of origin so that they could once again be used for ceremonial purposes (Province of Alberta, 2). This process is still ongoing, and will likely remain in the forefront of museum practices long into the future. Since the implementation of FNSCOPA, more than 300 sacred artifacts have been returned to the Indigenous communities from which they originated (Fisher, 4). Despite this progress, artifacts in delicate condition and

those claimed by multiple groups remain in Alberta museum collections today. While the repatriation of artifacts can be seen as a restorative solution to a historical problem, complexities of tracing ownership and ensuring the proper care and storage of materials once returned can make repatriation difficult, even when common goals exist (Bell, Christen and Turin, 5).

In the absence of legislation for repatriation in every other Canadian province and territory, with vast quantities of Indigenous artifacts held internationally, and with many Indigenous communities lacking proper storage and conservation facilities, digital repatriation projects are increasingly being established to provide Indigenous communities with digital access to both physical and ephemeral cultural artifacts (Fisher, 4).

Definition and description of “digital repatriation”

While repatriation as described above requires the transfer of ownership of an artifact from one party to the other, digital repatriation refers to providing electronic access to Indigenous communities of their cultural heritage in online museums as well as shared digital databases (Hennessy, 5; Bell, Christen, and Turin, 5; Gibson and Turner, 9; Phillips, 287). This requires cultural memory organizations to digitally photograph the Indigenous artifacts in their possession, and to transfer analog photographs, and video and audio recordings to digital format. These digital files are then uploaded, along with their data (museum records including accession information and provenance) to the Internet thereby providing remote access to the collection.

The term “digital repatriation” is a contentious one. Both researchers and Indigenous communities have criticized the term, pointing out that by definition, repatriation cannot occur without the exchange of ownership and control of an artifact (Gibson and Turner, 9). Advocates of the term have maintained that digital repatriation can be considered a rudimentary gesture of restitution in that it acknowledges a people’s right to and ownership of knowledge about their history and cultural achievements (Hogsden and Poulter, 279; Phillips, 288). Although the use of the term is contested, it remains widely used in the context described above.

Benefits of digital repatriation

The increased use of digital technologies to document, preserve, interpret, and disseminate information about Indigenous artifacts increases opportunities for collaboration between cultural memory organizations and local Indigenous communities and associations. When multiple organizations share a common content management system, it becomes possible to create large virtual collections spanning multiple institutions that allow users to explore subject matter regardless of the geographic location of the physical artifact (Tolva, 6; Hogsden and Poulter, 266). This makes it possible for cultural memory organizations, researchers, information professionals and Indigenous communities to work together to create large digital databases documenting multiple aspects of Indigenous culture including: material culture, cultural traditions, and linguistic history (Hennessy, 5). Three prominent examples of such large-scale projects are: the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), the Knowledge Sharing Database (GKS) of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC), and the Blackfoot Digital Library.

Freed from a static context within the walls of museums and archives – where physical artifacts are framed by institutional narrative – digital surrogates can be viewed and interpreted by a myriad of individuals, offering the opportunity to establish new contexts for understanding them (Hogsden and Poulter 267). This is of particular importance in that Indigenous voices have been conspicuously absent from museum interpretations of Indigenous culture in the past. Allowing Indigenous individuals in geographically isolated communities access to elements of previously inaccessible material culture provides mutually beneficial results for both parties. Museums gain valuable information regarding the provenance, fabrication, and precise function of artifacts. Indigenous communities have the opportunity to reengage with their historic material culture. Digital images can be used to reacquaint populations with artistic, cultural and linguistic traditions that disappeared during the processes of assimilation, creating opportunities for cultural resurgence and revitalization (Hennessy, 5; Gibson and Turner, 2; Fisher, 7). The confirmation that sacred ceremonial artifacts are present in museum collections,

coupled with increased dialogue between Indigenous communities and museums, may serve to increase opportunities for repatriation in the future.

Susan Rowley – a member of the Reciprocal Research Network Steering Group - described an example of positive collaboration between Indigenous communities and the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) that came about as the result of digital repatriation. An MOA artifact, Rattle A2100, was pictured and described online through the Reciprocal Research Network. The provenance of the artifact was vague, with “Northwest Coast” cited as the associated culture. Through the comments left by Indigenous community members on the RRN website it was revealed that the Musqueam, Stó:lō, and Coast Salish communities used such rattles for a sacred cleansing ritual, while the Kwakwaka’wakw people perform a dance – not considered to be sacred – with a similar rattle. Members of the Musqueam, Stó:lō, and Coast Salish cultures expressed concern over the digital display of what was perceived to be a sacred artifact. While the exact provenance of the artifact is unknown and the Reciprocal Research Network has not opted to remove the artifact from public viewing, the MOA did act upon the concerns voiced by Indigenous community members and acted to replace the artifact (then on display) with a similar rattle of known provenance that was not considered sacred (Rowley, 32-34). While controversy still exists with regard to the sharing of digital images of sacred artifacts, the presence of Rattle A2100 on the Reciprocal Research Network did result in the successful lobbying by Indigenous peoples to remove this sacred artifact from public display. The responsiveness of the MOA and the willingness of Indigenous community members to elaborate upon the use of the rattle and to state their concerns illustrate how digital repatriation projects can help to provide voice and authority to Indigenous peoples with regard to the interpretation and presentation of their cultural heritage.

Limitations of digital repatriation

While digital repatriation can benefit both cultural heritage institutions and Indigenous communities, issues of ownership, access and control must be addressed. It must not be forgotten that the Indigenous peoples of Canada are still struggling to overcome a history of legislation and policy designed to both abolish

Indigenous cultural practices and assimilate individuals into Euro-Canadian society. The impact of previous collection and exhibition practices employed by Canadian museums both alienated and marginalized Indigenous peoples. It has only been in the past twenty years – following the publication of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples Report in 1992 – that Canadian museums have actively sought to develop partnerships with Indigenous communities to aid in the interpretation of Indigenous cultural material (Research and Collections). In the case of digital repatriation, an imbalance of power exists in a majority of situations. The physical artifact remains the sole property of the museum, it is the museum that retains the right to determine how and to whom the digital surrogate may be shared, and it is the museum that authors the information that accompanies the surrogate. When controversies arise, as in the case of Rattle A2100 described above, it is the museum alone that determines what (if any) action is to take place to resolve the situation.

The issue of access is also a major limiting factor on the impact of digital repatriation in Indigenous communities. Although Internet penetration in Canada reached 77.7% of the population in 2004, Indigenous people - particularly those living in rural areas and on reserves - constituted a significant percentage of those who could only access the Internet through community portals (Gibson and Turner, 6). Further, basic access to the Internet does not ensure that members of a community possess the digital literacy skills to navigate and communicate in a meaningful way through a digital portal (Gibson and Turner, 6). Surmounting these elements of the digital divide in order to fully engage Indigenous communities in digital repatriation is difficult. While cultural heritage institutions may work to increase Internet access and digital literacy in isolated communities so that they can better participate in digital repatriation projects, the social, political, and economic disparity that exists in Indigenous populations in Canada can translate to lower participation rates simply due to the hardship of daily life.

Issues of control with regard to digital files become complicated once these files are uploaded to the Internet. Images and digital files are easily duplicated and shared, and copyright legislation is difficult to enforce online. Cultural memory organizations and research networks must carefully evaluate their policy on sharing

information with regard to sacred artifacts, as well as their role in mediating conversations between museums and Indigenous community members. The three organizations described below each have unique policies with regard to the sharing of images and information deemed sacred.

Case Studies: Three approaches to digital repatriation

With the increasing prevalence of digital repatriation by Canadian cultural memory organizations, it is beneficial to compare and contrast the policies and procedures of three of Canada's largest and best known digital repatriation projects: The Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC) Knowledge Sharing Database (GKS), and the Blackfoot Digital Library.

The Reciprocal Research Network was co-developed by the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia and three indigenous organizations: the Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lō Nation/Tribal Council, and the U'mista Cultural Society. The primary goal of the RRN is to facilitate reciprocal and collaborative research about Northwest Coast Culture. A secondary goal is to encourage communication and foster relationships between originating communities and its 23 affiliated holding institutions (About the RRN; Rowley, 27). In order to access images, audio, or video from the RRN, visitors must create a membership account detailing who they are, and why they would like access. Confirmation of membership is then e-mailed to the user, who – upon verification of the e-mail address - is granted full website access. The RRN website was designed to be accessible and easy to use for individuals with little or no computer experience. Developers created a faceted search interface based around the questions Who, What, When, and Where. Users wishing to limit search results select criteria from alphabetized tag clouds across multiple facets, making the website intuitive and easy to navigate (Rowley, 28). Users are welcome to add content using “Ask a Question” and “Shared Knowledge” features. User content is incorporated into an item's RRN record, and notification is sent to the affiliated institution so that they can engage in conversation and incorporate data into their own databases. With regard to the sharing of culturally sensitive materials, the RRN has adopted a

moderate approach, facilitating conversations between Indigenous communities and relevant institutions. The final decision on whether to restrict digital access to sacred items rests with the titleholder of the physical artifact.

Given that the Steering Committee for the RRN consists of two representatives from Indigenous organizations and only one from a museum – resulting in accusations of power imbalances from the museum sector, it is significant that the RRN appears to cater more to the academic and museum communities than to Indigenous communities (Rowley, 30). With museums retaining control over both physical and digital artifacts, Indigenous partners must subscribe to the terms and conditions set by this dominant culture in order to gain access to information. While the RRN claims to provide reciprocal benefits, it is museums and academic institutions that appear to derive the most benefit from this partnership. Future research detailing how Indigenous communities use and benefit from digital repatriation would strengthen claims of reciprocity by the RRN; however, at present no such research has been conducted.

The Knowledge Sharing Database (GKS) of the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC) takes a much more restrictive approach to providing access to potentially sensitive cultural material. As many artifacts have the potential to be considered sacred or sensitive, and protocols to protect this material have not yet been established by the alliance, access to the website is very restricted. Unlike the basic personal information requested by the RRN, those wishing to access the GKS must personally contact Heidi Bohaker – a Professor of Aboriginal History at the University of Toronto. An expectation is placed upon all members to reciprocate access to the website through the contribution of research results (About GRASAC). With an increased emphasis on academic research, the GKS does require that users submit database inquiries through the use of a search box. This approach may prove limiting to individuals not familiar with the formal vocabulary used by academics and cultural heritage institutions to describe artifacts. With strict membership requirements that could be considered a barrier by marginalized individuals seeking to access their cultural heritage, and a user interface that requires a degree of familiarity with descriptive

terms used in museum settings, it can be suggested that the GKS – while being the most protective of culturally sensitive materials – is the least responsive to the needs of Indigenous individuals of the three digital repatriation projects.

The Blackfoot Digital Library was formed in partnership with the University of Lethbridge and Red Crow Community College to preserve and make accessible as much of the Blackfoot cultural record as possible. In contrast to the RRN and GKS, the initial focus of the Blackfoot Digital Library was not to bring together elements of material culture, but rather to preserve elements of oral culture that had been recorded in various formats by respected Blackfoot and Blackfeet Elders (Swanepoel, 1-2). Like the GKS, visitors to the Blackfoot Digital Library are presented with a search box in order to navigate the database, however the results of the search – rather than being offered in the form of a written list – are presented as pins on a digital map. Different coloured pins on the map depict different artifact types: blue for text, green for photographs, and grey for audio. Visitors can click on the pins for brief descriptions of the related artifact, and link to access the full digital file. This search interface was selected to best reflect the Blackfoot worldview, where “all knowledge is derived from place” (Swanepoel, 4). With a new website to be launched before the end of 2014, and an active presence on social media, the Blackfoot Digital Library has proven to be a valuable and culturally relevant resource for the Blackfoot people (Blackfoot Digital Library).

Of the three digital repatriation projects, the Blackfoot Digital Library incorporated Indigenous worldviews and values to the greatest extent. Not inconsequentially, the Blackfoot Digital Library was the least dependent on museums and academic institutions for the acquisition of content. Indigenous organizations and individuals donated many of the photographs and recordings, and all content is considered the property of the Blackfoot People (About Us). The ability of the Blackfoot Digital Library to meet the needs and desires of the Blackfoot People while providing full access to academic and cultural heritage organizations illustrates that fully reciprocal partnerships can exist between Indigenous communities and academic and cultural heritage organizations. Matters become

increasingly more complicated when the ownership of cultural property and knowledge originating from one nation is maintained by a dominant other.

Conclusion

Relationships between cultural memory organizations and Indigenous communities in Canada continue to expand and evolve. Digital repatriation projects are working to provide Indigenous communities the opportunity to explore previously inaccessible elements of their material culture. Through reengagement with artistic, cultural, and linguistic traditions, communities can experience cultural resurgence and revitalization. Further, opportunities exist within digital repatriation for Indigenous peoples to add their voice to the interpretation and depiction of Indigenous culture in contemporary museums. Additional research is required to determine the extent to which digital repatriation positively impacts Indigenous populations, however it can be stated that the net impact is beneficial.

Museums, academic institutions, and cultural heritage organizations also benefit from digital repatriation. In fact, when the ownership and control of physical and thus digital artifacts remains in the possession of the dominant culture, it can be stated that these same groups benefit more from digital repatriation than Indigenous communities. When more is known about the provenance of cultural artifacts, their value both intellectually and monetarily increases. This data is easily shared between academic and cultural heritage organizations, while access to Indigenous communities is limited by Internet accessibility and economic disparity. Museums benefit from positive exposure through participation in digital repatriation projects, however ultimately very little control is ceded to Indigenous communities. With these factors in mind, it can be stated that while digital repatriation is a positive step in improving relationships between Canadian cultural memory organizations and Indigenous peoples, further work is required before this relationship can truly be considered reciprocal.

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