Mootookakio'ssin

Distant Awareness: Digital Imaging, Remote Viewing and Blackfoot items in the collections of Marischal Museum and National Museums Scotland.

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'New and changing technologies can work against the people or be harnessed and used in their own worldview': Narcisse Blood.

Introduction

The *Mootookakio'ssin* project began with a circle gathering of Blackfoot Knowledge Holders and researchers in July 2018 in Alberta, Canada to discuss the digitization of Blackfoot items currently held in museum collections in the UK. It has since expanded to create a trans-Atlantic network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, museum professionals, digital specialists, anthropologists, and archaeologists, guided by Blackfoot ceremonial leaders. Knowledge Holders felt that virtual access utilising digital imaging and spatial web technology would fit with their ongoing efforts to aid knowledge renewal and transmission. Digital images would be stored and managed by the Blackfoot Digital Library [BDL] sited at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta.

The name, *Mootookakio'ssin*, was given to the project by Blackfoot Knowledge Holder, Dr. Leroy Little Bear. In English it means distant awareness. The name proved prescient as our collaboration moved from in-person events and collection visits to virtual interactions over the pandemic period. Distant awareness: a way of knowing from afar, includes pedagogies of the model, stories, metadata, and photographs as well as inferences towards second-sight and

psychometry. In this paper we will focus on the affective potential of distant awareness. Affects are located in the midst of things. The concept of distant awareness highlights this sense of betweenness, of connection while being dislocated.

Prior to the pandemic, we planned for our group to visit in person Marischal Museum at the University of Aberdeen, where staff have a long-standing connection with the Blackfoot nations, and National Museums Scotland (NMS) in Edinburgh, which cares for Blackfoot items never before visited by Blackfoot people. Once it became clear that these visits could not happen, a new research question emerged: *how might we design a remote viewing experience to support cultural revitalization when in-person access is not an option?*

In this paper we bring our interdisciplinary perspectives to bear upon the practicalities, benefits and affective possibilities of virtual visits taking collection items from Aberdeen and Edinburgh as our guides.

Alongside Blackfoot items which are - in the late Frank Weasel Head's words - a curriculum: or items which socialise humans into reciprocal networks [Isaac, 2022], we have encountered a history of imaging and recording technology, from wet-plate photography through to laser scanning. Each technology plays with distance and closeness and expands our understanding of connections and practices, presenting historical constructions of vision and apparatus for its sensory extension. The remote viewings assemble a compound eye, gathering perceptions from participants with different positions and cultures. We aren't observers in this space, everyone is active as contributor and participant. Working together to record and build models makes us part of an intercultural network of obligation.

To frame the project, we begin with the words of Danielle Heavy Head who runs the BDL:

It is hard to express in English how important it is for Blackfoot people to connect with our historical items. To the Western perspective, these are just objects, but for the Blackfoot, they are living beings and the museum visits are like being reunited with children who were taken away. Seeing and touching the items allows Blackfoot people to reconnect with the material and their ancestors. The moment of first encountering the objects is an epiphany in self-identity – these objects help to understand who I am because they are part of who I am. The objects help to nurture culture and identity for the Blackfoot and the contact with the Blackfoot people also restores the objects. As with any living being, the objects have a life and a death. The museum visits rekindle the life force in the objects and helps us to reconnect the Blackfoot people to that life force.

This project brings the objects home in a digital version and shares the knowledge with the Blackfoot people. We will add the digital objects and the information about these objects to the BDL. This will give those moms, their kids, and all Blackfoot people access to the connection with the objects. Blackfoot artists want to learn how to make our art and they need to see the traditional designs, materials, and techniques. Even without being able to touch the items, the Blackfoot people can connect with them.

Preparations

Preparation for the virtual visits was spaced over several months, compiling lists, exchanging images and catalogue details, discussions and consultation with curators and our Blackfoot Advisory.

Now we hear from Melissa Shouting, a Blackfoot artist and knowledge holder:

Not having access to these items has hampered the ability for certain areas of knowledge to be awakened. Each object is tied to ancestors and their teaching; reactivating the objects creates a path to reconnect with Blackfoot knowledge and

Blackfoot identity, a process known as kakyosin (coming to know) which occurs through spiritual connection within the alliances of kin and natural law (Bastien, 2004). The objects are a map of Blackfoot traditions, a history of craft and material knowledge, and of relations between Blackfoot people and settlers. Yet, access to them remains limited and most Blackfoot people have little knowledge of what exists where.

Technical

In imagining our setup for these remote viewings, we wanted to create a real-time, interactive space across an 8-hour time difference. During our in-person museum visits we combined viewings with digital capture. This interlacing of viewing and scanning created connections. The digitisation was directly affected by the atmosphere and conversations. All members of the team could experience the digital imaging process first hand.

Our emphasis in visiting NMS was to record quillwork. Quillworking is a transferred right and part of our project is to aid the community in its revitalisation. Technically, our focus has been to foster accessibility and work responsively in each context, hand-stitched digital techniques to look at hand-stitched items. Viewings are not ends in themselves but creative, virtual exchanges: experimental processes with shifting conditions, necessitated by the geographic dislocations of the pandemic waves and informed by improvisatory art practices.

 Pragmatically, we opted for Zoom for our communications channel as we are all familiar with it. Issues of connectivity, generational skill sets, variable personal equipment determined our choices. Zoom is limited in resolution but good for discussion. Alongside this, Tom Allison, our technical artist, ran a high-resolution stream on his server. The difference in switching from a low-resolution close-up of quillwork to Tom's high-resolution feed was significant - some of it

was assumed to be beading until the close-up feed made minute details visible. Elders later remarked that they could see more than in a conventional viewing.

Whilst we use DSLRs for recording items, we set up smartphones to give a sense of the working spaces, alongside the detailed feed of items. A sense of context and scale is important and each device has specific imaging capacities.

We used multiple smartphones on lightweight tripods for the remote viewings, they cope well with variable lighting conditions and don't need a sim card, you can link them to zoom through wifi. They can be used intuitively to feel around an object, and with a battery pack can sustain a long session. Mobile-phone cameras put eyes in your hand and let you investigate an item in different ways. We were reminded of a story we were told on Blackfoot territory about birds called Chickadees who are able to dart their eyes out of their bodies and see the world from multiple positions. A singular viewpoint begins to seem a product of the European imaginary. Its partiality is diversified by contemporary imaging technology.

Aberdeen

Prior to the event at NMS, we tested our setup in the University Museum stores in Aberdeen. The University repatriated a holy bundle to the Kainai Nation in 2003, and has hosted a number of Blackfoot visits since then, including teaching ventures between the anthropology department and Red Crow Community College. Those visits were some time ago, and we wanted to revisit the collections with Melissa Shouting and Danielle Heavy Head, who joined us remotely from home. This was an intimate conversation over a few items, and we focus here on the example of two pairs of beaded moccasins that came into the museum in the 1930s.

While Alison was familiar with the items, what was striking was how looking at them together revealed new insights and encouraged a closer form of looking. We were able to mix a digital microscope into the conversation, but found that the magnification of the smartphone was

more than adequate in showing detail of beadwork and stitching. We got a better view of what appeared to be a repurposed parfleche bag used as the inner sole of a moccasin, with the paint side facing upwards, something none of us had seen before.

Melissa demonstrated remotely how a stitch was made while we saw this in our feed next to the item itself. We were also able to make direct comparisons between items in response to conversation, for example, we discussed whether the seamstress who did the beadwork on both pairs of moccasins might have been the same, given the similarities between the colours, size of the beads, and the design.

This viewing, with its focus on just a few items, was helpful for experimenting with some of the practical issues that we hoped to iron out prior to the larger group viewing planned at NMCC. The session allowed us to experiment with sound, to be aware of where our bodies were in relation to the microphones and cameras, and to be mindful of the short lag between what was said and what appeared on our colleagues' screens.

Edinburgh

Time-zones and stores opening hours meant we had a two-hour window for the viewing at NMS' Collections Centre. The Edinburgh team joined the session with bluetooth headsets to hear directions and comments from Canada. Elders gathered in Lethbridge where Christine had set up large screens displaying the Zoom-call and the high-resolution feed side-by-side. A conference microphone picked up conversation along the row of socially-distanced seating. Cameras were connected to send a video feed of the room back to Edinburgh.

We began with a prayer. Over the session we surveyed 24 items, some passed over quickly and some where we lingered to focus upon details. Many Blackfoot items at NMS date from the mid 19th and early 20th centuries and were acquired by colonial administrators and traders.

Blackfoot and other nations were subject to an extensive program of "ethnographic salvage" by colonial travellers, resulting in large collections of Indigenous cultural heritage items in European museums (Brown, 2014).

Looking closely at a beadwork horse crupper, sold to the Museum in 1902 by Reverend W H Bonehill, revealed that a pair of Levis had been repurposed on the underside. Bonehill also sold objects to the Pitt Rivers Museum whose archives contain notes about how some of the objects were made. Unfortunately similar notes have not survived in the NMS archive.

During the viewing, Elders were able to discuss what they were seeing amongst themselves, as well as relay information back to Edinburgh. Due to the size of the group and spacing, conversations happened simultaneously, creating a mix of public and private dialogue. Over the course of the two hours, we found a rhythm and familiarity through the mix of smooth and fractured communications. Jokes emerged from the unusual experience of remotely directing the camera in Edinburgh. After the session closed there were parallel conversations among participants on both sides of the world, piecing together insights prompted by the viewing. We reconvened remotely on a second day with a smaller group and looked again at some of the items in detail, hearing stories as we did so. Melissa talked about a cradle board. Blackfoot people used moss bags for the baby, so the cradleboard might have been made by the child's mother who had married into the Blackfoot people. The designs round the edge of the cradleboard are Shoshone, the hood has Blackfoot designs. The cradle itself acts as a binding together of communities.

Multiple objects

A moving camera used in exploration risks motion-sickness in the viewer. It's an experiential mode of viewing. Quillwork might rely on a glint or glimmer to enliven an item. This is where a moving light source is useful alongside a standardised, colour-corrected image where affect

tends to be flattened and one aspect of an object is presented. The inter-cultural viewpoints of our group produced a kaleidoscopic sense of the multiplicity of the items we viewed. For example, the beadwork crupper held by NMS which repurposed fabric from a pair of pre-1890s Levis spring-back pants. This lit up the Denimbro forum momentarily, reminding us of the communities of practice through which technology moves, rather than the objects isolated from their social relationships. It also demonstrated how material culture is implicated in processes of colonial entanglement. Other instances of multiplicity occurred. The moccasins soled with a re-used hide. The cradleboard combining motifs from two peoples. These are examples of objects composed of multiple and overlapping relationships.

Conclusion

Writing about Blackfoot material culture Maria Zedeño observes that: 'object hierarchies are situational and membership in a given class is ambivalent and unpredictable' [Zedeño, 2009, 409]. This is true also of the analysis of material things in digital spaces.

We return to the figure of the Chickadee, the small bird able to see from multiple viewpoints. The choreography of cameras directed by Elders and the distant viewing of Blackfoot items enacts remotely this notion of a communal optic.

We began the process with misgivings about the limitations of remote viewing. Afterwards all participants were enthusiastic about the events and their potential, both to reach a broader community and to prepare for in person visits. Unexpected camera moves and ad hoc conversations produce interesting assemblages of images and ideas in the moment. Someone holds up a book or an object for comparison. Metadata and provenance info are dropped into the chat. Stories are told. The immediate connections between people draw out the complex provenancing of the collection items, their journeys, composition and habitats.

Jerry Potts, told us that Argillite, the black stone he uses to carve pipe bowls, hardens in the fire. Each time the pipe is lit there is a material affect, a strengthening. We take this as a key piece of

teaching for the whole project. This affective assemblage, an alliance of different kinds of knowledge and items displaced by colonial forces, begins to patch together and re-connect interrupted knowledge. What is composed is not the singular viewpoint associated with 'truth' in the European sense, but an overlapping knowledge of items. We believe that a knowledge composed of differing and diverse viewpoints, 'tacking'' between different kinds of knowledge is ultimately stronger and more effective (see Tsing 2015, 285; Wylie 1989). Remote viewing is an activity of reciprocation, a web to form alliances where 'objects' are mediating communication - a new physical and conceptual context for exploring relations.

References

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