Distant Awareness: Affect and Remote Viewing of Blackfoot items in the collections of Marischal Museum, Aberdeen and National Museums Scotland, Edinburgh.

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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, and 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. Blackfoot Knowledge Holders felt that virtual access utilising digital imaging techniques and spatial web technology would fit with their ongoing efforts to assist in processes of knowledge renewal and transmission. The resulting digital images would be stored and managed by the Blackfoot Digital Library sited at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada.

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 significant 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 which might include for instance, pedagogies of the model [how a model makes its source manifest and how it is used in teaching], stories, metadata, catalogue entries and photographs as well as inferences towards second sight, intuitive sensing, and bilocation. In this paper we will focus on the affective potential of distant awareness. This is particularly important as affects are located in the midst of things, and the concept of distant awareness highlights this sense of betweenness, of connection while being simultaneously dislocated.

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, we were planning for members of our group to visit Marischal Museum at the University of Aberdeen, UK where staff have a long-standing connection with the Blackfoot nations, and the National Museums Collection Centre (NMCC) in Edinburgh, UK which cares for Blackfoot items never before visited by Blackfoot people. Once it became clear that this visit would not be happening, a new research question emerged: *how might we design a remote viewing experience to support cultural revitalization for Indigenous communities when in-person access is not an option?*

In this paper we bring our interdisciplinary perspectives to bear on the practicalities, benefits and affective possibilities of remote viewing. Drawing on our virtual visits to Marischal Museum and NMCC we illustrate how interdisciplinary learning can be used as a

methodology to interrogate complex problems and advocate for a greater understanding of the usage and impact of digital imaging practices across disciplines.

Alongside the Blackfoot items which are - in the late Frank Weasel Head's words - a curriculum in themselves, we have also encountered a history of imaging and recording technology, from the wax cylinder, to wet-plate photography through to laser scanning and digital imaging. Each technology plays with distance and closeness and expands our understanding of connections and practices, presenting historical constructions of vision and apparatus for its extension.

We have all become familiar with technologies of long distance exchange over the pandemic. Alongside all the glitches and crashes, there is also a potential for innovative communication and for friendships to be extended. We had planned an in-person circle gathering but social distancing and its geometries put us all into square boxes. The screen interface itself puts us all on a level, offering some solace, remote immediacy across time zones, networked points of exchange: daily life interactions that mediate across different disciplines and different worlds. We aren't observers in this space, everyone is active as contributor and participant. The remote viewings assemble a kind of compound eye, gathering perceptions from participants with different positions and disciplinary focus.

This paper brings those voices together. We will talk through the pragmatics of the viewings, taking collection items from Aberdeen and Edinburgh as our navigation tools.

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

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 for viewing

Thinking about remote viewing and about viewing at all, we have got used to there being

things we may not look at or that are not appropriate to be in a public space. This is an

unusual position for those who study art and material culture in archaeological and art

school contexts. But it does point to a need to rethink our relation to transgression through

Édouard Glissant's 'right to opacity' [Glissant, 1997] or Audra Simpson's politics of refusal

[Simpson, 2014]. Their positions produce vital occlusions, challenging cultural frameworks

and accepted ideas of liberal 'rights'. In *Making Kin with the Machines* Jason Edward Lewis

[Lewis et al, 2018] notes that Indigenous epistemologies wrong-foot the western

technocratic project through expansive understandings of non-human kin. He instead

proposes an extended 'circle of relationships'.

Preparation for the viewings was spaced over several months, exchanging images and

museum catalogue details, discussions, and consultation back and forth with curators and

with our Blackfoot Advisory group. What is there, how did it get there? Misidentifications,

blanks, fragmentary details.

Now we hear from Melissa Shouting:

> 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 the 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.

The project works because we have established and are continually renewing networks on traditional Blackfoot Territory and in the UK. From here we can extend and experiment with new or more tenuous channels of communication whilst trusting the connections we have grown together. Knowledge Holder, 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.

Technical set up / improvisatory methodology

Our emphasis in this part of the project has been the analysis of quillwork and beadwork items. Our emphasis with the technical aspects has been on fostering accessibility and working responsively with each context. In a sense we are producing hand-stitched digital techniques to look at hand-stitched items. We work as much as possible with FLOSS [free libre open source] software solutions. Tom Allison, our technical artist, is keen to build kit, to get things out of the black box, to work with what is at hand. Skill-sharing and learning are embedded in the process.

We have to balance this digital enquiry with working with different levels of technical know-how, web connection and workaday issues. We opted for Zoom for our communications channel as everyone on the project works with it already. Issues of connectivity, [poor internet on the reservations in Canada, access to network points etc] generational skill sets, variation of viewing equipment and personal settings [mobile phones, tablets, old PCs] and ease of access. Zoom is limited in resolution, but we can talk and type there, then Tom runs a high resolution stream on his own server to provide sharp visuals. The difference when we switched from a low-resolution close-up of floral quillwork to Tom's high-resolution feed is significant - originally it was thought that some of the quillwork might be beading until the high-resolution close-up feed was provided and minute details became visible.

The viewings are not ends in themselves, but an experimental process with shifting conditions, in part necessitated by the geographic dislocations of the pandemic waves but also informed by improvisatory art practices. We see them as creative, virtual exchanges. Teaching in Universities and art schools over lockdown has given us a lot of opportunities to experiment with staging events and objects in hybrid spaces. Whilst we use DSLRs for recording items, we used multiple smartphones on lightweight tripods for the remote viewings. They cope well with variable lighting conditions and can each be dialled into the comms feed. 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 our first visit to Blackfoot territory about small 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. The partiality of a singular viewpoint is diversified by contemporary imaging technology.

Aberdeen

Prior to the event at NMCC, we tested our set up in the University Museum stores in Aberdeen. There are long-standing connections between the University of Aberdeen and the Blackfoot. The University repatriated a holy bundle to the Kainai Nation in 2003, and has hosted a number of Blackfoot visits since then, including a workshop looking at the impact of repatriation in 2010, and in relation to joint teaching ventures between the anthropology department and Red Crow Community College on the Blood reserve. As such, and by contrast with NMCC, some Blackfoot people have had the opportunity to engage in person with the collections. Nonetheless, those visits were some time ago, and we wanted to revisit the collections with two colleagues, Melissa Shouting and Danielle Heavy Head, who joined us remotely from home. This was an intimate conversation over a small number of items, and we focus here on the example of two pairs of beaded moccasins that came into the museum in the 1930s.

While Alison Brown (an anthropologist based at Aberdeen) was familiar with the items, what was especially striking was how looking at them in conjunction with Melissa and Danielle revealed new insights and encouraged a closer form of looking, assisted by the digital technologies. This gave us 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. While it was exciting to learn something new about

these moccasins, it was a useful reminder, as Melissa and Danielle pointed out, that nothing was ever wasted.

Melissa was able to demonstrate 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 and size of the beads, and the design.

Edinburgh

Time-zones and museum stores opening hours meant we had a two hour window for the viewing in Edinburgh and so we were especially attentive to the coordination and choreography of movement and care of items through the process. Team members working with the items in the space joined the session with their smartphones and earphones in order to hear directions, questions and comments from Knowledge Holders in Canada. Blackfoot Knowledge Holders came together at the University of Lethbridge Penny Building in downtown Lethbridge, Alberta where the team had set up several large screens and a conference microphone with enough space for social distancing. Other project members joined remotely. We began with a prayer. Over the session we surveyed 24 items, some passed over quickly and some where we lingered with camera work to focus upon details as directed by Elders. Looking closely at a decorated horse crupper (a type of horse equipment)

revealed that a pair of 19th century Levi jeans had been repurposed on the underside of the item, giving it weight and supporting the intricate beadwork on the other side.

After the session closed there were parallel conversations among participants on both sides of the world, collecting thoughts and piecing together insights prompted by the viewing. We reconvened remotely on a second day with a smaller group who brought their thoughts to the table and looked again at some of the items in detail, hearing stories and insights as we did so. Melissa Shouting talked about the cradle board A.1963.473 as a marriage of Shoshone and Blackfoot beadwork. She said Blackfoot people used moss bags for the baby, so the cradle board might have been made by the child's mother who had married into the Blackfoot people. She described the designs round the edge of the cradle board as Shoshone with the hood having Blackfoot designs and the cradle itself as a binding together of communities. Looking again, over and over, is an important part of the process of recognition. Each item opens up a world.

Multiple objects

The moving camera used in the exploration of an item is an experiential mode of viewing. Quillwork might rely on a glint or glimmer to enliven an item. This is where the moving camera, or in this case a moving light source, might be useful alongside a standardised, documentary, colour-corrected catalogue image where affect tends to be flattened and one single aspect of an object is presented. The multiple viewpoints of our remote viewing digital technique produced a sense of multiplicity. These multiple viewpoints also reveal the multiplicity of the items we are viewing. For example, the traditional horse crupper

decorated with beadwork was revealed to be backed by fabric derived from Levi Jeans, illustrating a theme often noted by archaeologists studying colonial contexts: material culture is often implicated in processes of colonial entanglement. Other instances of multiplicity also occur in our analysis of items in the Aberdeen and Edinburgh collections. The moccasin made of a re-used parfleche hide. The cradleboard that combines techniques from Blackfoot and Shoshone people. These are examples of what we have previously described as 'multiple objects' (Jones et. al. 2016), or objects composed of multiple and overlapping relationships.

It is no accident that our recognition of these multiple objects emerged from a remote viewing session involving Indigenous people alongside anthropologists, archaeologists, and artists. The multiple and overlapping viewpoints that emerged in this viewing session were especially attentive to the multiple character of the items that we were analysing. We will conclude by thinking about the affective significance of these practices of looking.

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 that in the Blackfoot imagination is able to see from multiple viewpoints. The choreography of cameras in the stores is directed and orchestrated by Knowledge Holders and the remote viewing of Blackfoot items in

collections in Aberdeen and Edinburgh enacts in digital form this notion of multiple sightedness.

Back-channel chat, unexpected camera moves, and ad hoc conversations produce interesting assemblages of inter-related images and ideas in the moment. Someone will hold up a book or an object for comparison. Metadata and provenance info will be dropped into the Zoom chat. Stories are told. The immediate connections between people draw out the complex provenancing of the collection items, their journeys, composition and habitats. There is lag on the system, between the different feeds, between here and there.

This affective assemblage, composed of different kinds of knowledge and items displaced by colonial forces across the Atlantic, begins to patch together and re-connect interrupted and fragmentary knowledges. What is composed is not the singular clear sighted viewpoint associated with 'truth' and veracity in the European sense, but a kind of multiple overlapping knowledge of items. We believe that a knowledge composed of such differing and diverse viewpoints that 'tacks' between different kinds of knowledges is ultimately stronger and more effective (see Tsing 2015, 285; Wylie 1989). The items draw us into a technical mycellium (or fungal network), a dynamic system expanding our understanding of connections and practices. Remote viewing is an activity of reciprocation, real time interaction, commentary and lively backchannel chat - another web to form alliances where 'objects' are mediating communication - a new physical and conceptual context for exploring relations.