

Multiple Viewpoints and Other Digital Collaborators

ABSTRACT

Collaboration is a process in which different perspectives matter. Who, what, why, where, when, and how, are a few registers indicating the diffractive possibilities surrounding the notion of collaboration. These imbricated factors, over which some actants have disproportionate impact, responsibility, and authority, fundamentally affect the direction projects and other matters of importance will take. Here, we endeavour to extend the knowledge derived from collaborations into a much richer multivocality, surrounding two artefact assemblages, both held in institutional settings with restricted access. One is a carved stone, called the *Nessglyph*, currently lodging in the University of Southampton. The other is a distributed assemblage of Blackfoot *belongings* held by several UK Museums. We helped make both these collections available to invested collaborators via remote viewings employing in the first case an open crowdsourced collaboration model, and in the second we consider some of the dynamics of a closed collaborative group. We conclude that both collaborations require an openness that is only afforded through constant work and constant re-working as the artefacts and images in these projects constantly fold into their own omissions so that the work can respond to the politics and ethics of image making.

MAIN PAPER

Collaboration is a process in which different perspectives matter. Who, what, why, where, when, and how, are a few registers indicating the diffractive possibilities surrounding the notion of collaboration. These imbricated factors, over which some actants have disproportionate impact, responsibility, and authority, fundamentally affect the direction projects and other matters of importance will take. The authors - two artists, and an archaeologist - are long-time *transdisciplinary* collaborators (see Nilsson Stutz 2018). Here, we endeavour to extend the knowledge derived from our collaborations into a much richer multivocality, surrounding two artefact assemblages, both held in institutional settings with restricted access. One is a carved stone, called the *Nessglyph*, from an excavation in Shropshire, but currently lodging in the University of Southampton (Dawson & Reilly forthcoming). The other is a distributed assemblage of Blackfoot *belongings* held by several UK Museums. We helped make these collections available to invested collaborators via remote viewings employing digital versions of the assemblages. In the case of the carving, our collaborators were individuals who engaged with us through a press communication, an outreach intervention. The Blackfoot belongings were (re)considered by a closed group consisting of Blackfoot Elders, museum professionals, the present writers, and our digital collaborators (Allison et al forthcoming). Such distributed cognitive assemblages embrace different modes of collaboration, something we want to investigate further. We ask: "who or what counts as a collaborator?"

Case Study 1: The Nessglyph Re(dis)covered

Excavators re(dis)covered a red sandstone, adorned with a unique carving, in the backfill of a previous dig on Nesscliffe hillfort. The official interpretation of the Nessglyph (Reilly, Lock & Dawson 2023) proposes a figurative depiction of a putative, eponymous, and totemic, Romano-British, horned deity of the *Cornovii* tribe (translated as the 'horned' ones). This reading depends on orientating the sandstone in a specific way. When rotated this artefact immediately escapes our grasp invoking alternative readings. Found disturbed, the stone's original setting is unsure, and so any interpretation is compromised and must be negotiated or reset. Nevertheless, in the spirit of community outreach, a decision was made to invite other, external, opinions, to create a crowd-sourced collaboration, on what the Nessglyph might (re)present. Notes were drafted, accompanied by an *enhanced* image provided by our digital collaborators (i.e, sensors, algorithms and

printers). *British Archaeology* published one version (Reilly & Lock 2023), and Shropshire County published another on their *Newsroom* webpage. Both articles invited interpretive suggestions or links to other physical parallels.

British Archaeology readers responded with a handful of interesting emails, several of them from scholars sharing their extensive academic knowledge. Sharing requires reciprocity, which is, arguably, another form of collaboration. However, we totally underestimated the power and reach of the internet to generate potential ‘collaborators’ to share, and how the same image can be read so differently through other, very diverse, lenses. The BBC featured this interpretive venture on their portal; another flow of responses ensued. Other international media outlets followed with translations on their portals – the seeds of extended, multivocal, collaboration was sown. The ‘mystery’ of the Nessglyph went viral. Hundreds of emails - offering various intriguing interpretations, transformative ideas, grizzly suggestions - were harvested. A great deal of thought and imagination was invested, and generously shared, by our correspondents, who often included impressive marked-up, further digitally enhanced, images of the published Nessglyph in support of their own theory. Several people thanked ‘the experts’ for inviting this broader spectrum of opinions to be considered seriously. These serious contributions also demanded a response and replies to emails often elicited further inputs from these would-be collaborators. In short, this worldwide response to interpreting the Nessglyph demonstrates that many people want to contribute to such discussions, to offer alternative views (Lock & Reilly 2023), to collaborate, even in a peripheral manner, questioning how wide is the assemblage of collaboration?

Although the Nessglyph has tumbled out of context into backfill and is dissociated from any persisting oral or written history, it remained purposefully anchored in a place where cultural practices occurred, including building entrance passageways, smelting iron, and archaeological investigations (Lock & Reilly In prep.). Whatever memory was inscribed and gouged into it, the object survives as a silent reference whose scratches and marks point to encounters with a once social world. It offers a trap for our attention, an irresistible bait. It can only be transformed into new social relationships in the present: extended, embellished and activated through our current multivocal communicative networks. Its detail is turned through many hands to slough off variations of interpretation through the magic of resemblance and desire including the interactive technics of computational photography. The rock gave itself up to Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) and Structure from Motion (SfM) photogrammetric capture (Dawson & Reilly forthcoming). New versions and iterations spin out to be performed anew each time they load, creating fresh digital spawning grounds for further collaborations.

RTI and SfM are both technologies of imbrication, where multiple viewpoints or multiple light positions are compiled. RTI requires light to be shone from many positions within an enveloping dome of a static object. SfM also requires that the object be circled, but each camera does not frame a composition or singular picture but is mapped by overlaps and points to spatialise a 3D file. Seeing from many directions maps out spatial data and produces a common hallucination or suggests a collective articulated and networked body of many eyes. We were reminded of a story we were told on Blackfoot territory about birds called Chickadees who can 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.

Even though the Nessglyph was not found in situ, was displaced from its story, with its people erased, the physical object, unlike its far-flung digital avatars, was still embodied within the setting of its homeland.

Case Study 2: Reappropriating Blackfoot Belongings

We come now to consider displaced and misappropriated Blackfoot items in UK museum collections. These things and beings are still deeply connected with their people, story, songs and land, lived experience, dreams and visions despite their current separation and the prolonged torpor of incarceration. Blackfoot people hold

and renew long time multigenerational knowledge, cycles and practices anchored in place, bundled and embodied in belongings. For the Siksikaitsitapi [Blackfoot], knowledge is experiential, participatory, and ultimately sacred, rather than objective and inert. (Bastien 2004, Zedeno et al 2021)

Concepts Have Teeth and its sister project on Blackfoot territory *Mootookakio'ssin* [Distant Awareness] aim to connect Blackfoot people living in North America with their cultural heritage held by museums in the UK. Directed by Knowledge Holders from the four Blackfoot nations Kainai, Piikani, Siksika, and Amskapipiikani, the project is a collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, artists, archaeologists, museum professionals and students. The project uses digital imaging techniques, art-based public engagement and spatial web technologies with the aim to improve the ability of Blackfoot people to interact with their historical belongings and recover and shape their own narratives surrounding them. Our project is founded on the core Blackfoot perspective that knowledge is something we have a responsibility to care for and to share.

Man is neither height nor centre of creation. This belief is core to many Indigenous epistemologies. It underpins ways of knowing and speaking that acknowledge kinship networks that extend to animals and plants, wind and rocks, mountains and oceans. Indigenous communities worldwide have retained the languages and protocols that enable us to engage in dialogue with our non-human kin, creating mutually intelligible discourses across differences in material, vibrancy, and genealogy. (Lewis et al 2021)

This is making a commitment to decolonising our disciplines and to philosophical plurality to foster meaningful collaboration and co-creation. Our focus in this project is on the benefit for Blackfoot colleagues and community of producing digital models of their distant (dis/mis-placed) belongings that acknowledges the vital and interconnected role of Indigenous thinkers, makers, and Knowledge Holders but also foregrounds the potential impact of the (displaced) belongings themselves. The benefits for collaborating artists, curators and archaeologists are numerous, as worldviews are opened up and long-standing misconceptions and misinterpretations are reset. This project is fed by a multiplicity of voices, worldviews and transdisciplinary exchange to shape an heuristic assemblage of practice.

The name, *Mootookakio'ssin*, was given to the project by Blackfoot Knowledge Holder, Dr. Leroy Little Bear. In English it means distant awareness. Distant awareness is a way of knowing from afar which might include 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. The name proved prescient as our collaboration moved from in person events and collection visits to virtual interactions over the pandemic period. Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, we were planning for project members to visit National Museums Scotland. Once it became clear that this visit wouldn't be happening, a new research question emerged: how might we design a remote viewing experience to support the cultural revitalization for Indigenous communities when in-person access is not an option? We set about to stream a live video of the items at National Museums Scotland to a gathering of Blackfoot Elders in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. In preparation, curatorial staff at National Museums Scotland took record images of objects identified as Blackfoot or Plains and circulated these and database records among Blackfoot Elders. A selection was made for the remote viewing through ongoing conversations over several months.

A Zoom feed for basic communication was set up, along with a separate high-resolution stream. We used multiple smartphone cameras to give remote visitors a sense of the space we were working in as well as closeups of items. Blackfoot Elders came together at the University of Lethbridge where the team had set up several large screens and microphones with space for social distancing. Over the session we surveyed 24 items, some passed over quickly and some where we lingered to focus upon details as directed by Elders. Looking closely at a horse crupper accessioned to NMS in 1902 revealed a pair of Levis had been repurposed on its underside. On display the back of the crupper is not visible to a museum visitor and its integration of materials

goes unremarked. The crupper is an 'apparatus' in Agamben's (2019) terms, "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings." It secures tack on the animal, entangling animal and human. It also captures our attention. Detail shots of the workwear incorporated into the beaded horse regalia were shared via accomplices onto the DenimBro forum, where a community of cognoscenti ventured dating advice based upon the studs, cut of the pocket and unusual triangular stitch on its corners. The consensus was that the pants were pre-1890s brown-twill spring-back pants, pants that were marketed for storekeepers rather than labourers.

There was sometimes lag on the high-res feed, which gave a sense of tempo in the conversation and the awareness of time and distance. 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.

Conclusions

Both physical collections in our case studies were removed from circulation and therefore from interpretation and a lively relation to current worlds. As museums and galleries now increasingly seek to develop relationships with source communities and open their storage, questions arise of how efficacious virtual visits and circulating digital models may be in opening new creative, lively and inclusive collaborations. How does the outcome of multivocal collaboration feed into the record - as paradata - and actively change structural inequity? As disciplines and establishments seek to change, to acknowledge, unsettle and dismantle frameworks of colonial modernity, it is imperative to find ways to learn from, embrace and be led by those gracious enough to share, whose voices have been disregarded and actively silenced. Such collaborations are the only ways to ask the question together: what do we want to make into the future not reducible to moments of looting?

Coming back to our machinic collaborators, we can think about the kaleidoscope to figure histories, perceptions and fragments, how we process reality, research, through turning, new conjunctions, re-scattering. The two mirrors of the kaleidoscope and rotation of fragments allows an ever-changing worldview, fragments become flux. In these projects the performative production of matter is used as a complementary process, it is understood that when objects manifest through assemblages they do so at the expense of other possibilities and as such are reminders that things could be otherwise if the assemblage was composed in another way. The work not only seeks to remember other possibilities it makes those accessible for future reuse, Here the work can be thought of as a 'capacity-building' practice (Stephansen & Trere 2019) where the dual aspect of capacity is explored. The work expands people's capacity to actively participate as well as broadening the possibility for the assemblage to continue to grow. Giroud (2019) notes the necessity to heed the tools that are entangled within the production of knowledge, it is not enough to just acknowledge the noninnocence in image making, this recognition alone only serves to naturalise exclusionary aspects to the practice. Instead, the diffractive and messy image-making as practiced in these projects has worked towards a productive relationship with the inevitable effects of the agential cut. This requires an openness that is only afforded through constant work and constant re-working as the artefacts and images in these projects constantly fold into their own omissions so that the work can respond to the politics and ethics of image making. Combining archive visits with different stakeholders alongside the technical RTI and SfM imaging sessions allowed for a knotting together of narratives. These viewings were unapologetically complex as they involved multiple discussions between various voices but were fundamental in the production of digital objects that were not 'oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter' (Tsing 2015, 40)

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