

The Digital Biography of Things

A Canadian Case Study in Digital Repatriation

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Abstract I propose taking a closer look at the anthropological, classificatory and exhibitionary principles on which a Canadian digital repatriation project (GRASAC) was built. The process of dematerialisation and subsequent reinsertion into a new ‘concretion’ (the digital database) has lent the objects a new status within a certain organisational structure. This kind of products, once created, take on a life and history of their own, separate from that of the objects themselves. Digital files of physical objects are more than just simple reproductions or copies, and can be read as a further phase of the ‘objects’ biography’.

Summary 1 Foreword. – 2 How to Repatriate and to Whom?. – 3 Digital Technologies and Source Communities. – 4 GRASAC. – 5 Digital Biographies.

Keywords Communities. Ownership. Digital repatriation.

Digital repatriation is not intended to be a substitute for the actual transfer of ownership of cultural property through repatriation negotiations. However, digital access can accomplish a first level of image and text repatriation, returning to originating communities information about their history and cultural achievements. As an ethical gesture, it responds to people’s right to own their pasts.

(Phillips 2011, 287-88)

1 Foreword

In Canada, as in other parts of the world, in the middle of the 19th century, during the so-called ‘Classic Era’ of museum collecting, ethnographic collections were amassed on the premise that Native populations would soon disappear under the weight of impending modernity, and, therefore, artifacts from these cultures on the verge of extinction should be saved for the future. This established a one-sided relationship that reinforced the conviction that knowledge was the privilege of Western institutions. Colonial empires were the largest settings for this kind of relationship. In recent years, Native communities, as well as so-called new settler socie-

ties (such as representatives of diaspora communities) have started to counter this pervasive theoretical and methodological model, requesting, for instance, the repatriation of objects stolen in the past, or demanding to work with museum curators to represent their own point of view. In some national contexts, these protests mirrored the transformation of relationships with Indigenous communities, whose battles for cultural property had by then gained political recognition. In this changed climate, objects as museums became new “contact zones” (Clifford 1997; Peers, Brown 2003), metaphorical “spaces of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come in contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflicts” (Pratt as quoted in Clifford 1997, 192).

Objects in museums embody both indigenous knowledge and the history of colonial expansion, which is the reason these collections exist. They are embedded in layers of overlapping histories, which have value and meaning for the communities to which they belong, and for the museums that claim ownership of them. In particular, for those communities afflicted by radical and rapid transformation, the objects held in museums represent a material heritage that embodies the lives and knowledge of their past. At the same time, these objects also represent a bridge to the future because, through them, it becomes possible to regain contact with a universe of knowledge and information useful both in the present and in the future (Peers, Brown 2003).

Therefore, through loans or repatriation, objects can be returned to the communities they belong to, so as to pass on knowledge from generation to generation. Through the act of repatriation, the pivotal role that objects can have on a community’s identity is recognized, as well as the community’s right to claim and have access to them. In cases where objects are never returned to their communities, museums act as caretakers on their behalf.

Several approaches to the conservation and safeguarding of artifacts have been used (Clavir 2002). In some museums run by Indigenous communities there is little interest in the conservation of these objects. Australian Aboriginals, for example, see museums as places to store the objects until they can be used again. Other museums favour practices that take the interests and needs of Indigenous communities into consideration. Nowadays, for instance, museums acknowledge that numerous Indigenous groups may treat these objects as living entities possessing supernatural powers that can put both the museum and its visitors at risk.¹ Today, the meaning of an object is no longer related solely to its production and use,

1 In this regard, museums are slowly adapting to Indigenous traditions, which require ceremonies or fumigation of sacred or sensitive objects.

but also includes the meanings that it may carry for Indigenous communities in the present as well as in the future (Bouquet 2012).

2 How to Repatriate and to Whom?

The first reaction to challenges launched by Indigenous communities regarding the housing of collections of objects in museums was one of fear; namely the fear of losing the right to own and exhibit indigenous materials.² In fact, the legislation on this issue has been very conservative regarding the call for immediate repatriation of objects (Nicks 2003). The NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) and the regulations mandated in Canada by the National Association of Museums (Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples 1992) and in Australia (Museums Australia 1996) are quite cautious about repatriation issues.³ Today many collections have been returned and others soon will be; new museums and cultural centres have also been created following the restitution of collections of objects (Kreps, 2003; Coody Cooper, 2006). A well-known case concerning two Canadian institutions in Cape Mudge Village and Alert Bay – where objects taken forcibly by the Canadian government in 1992, during an ‘illegal’ potlatch, are now on display (Clifford 1999) – exemplifies this trend.

The question of ownership is perhaps one of the most complex matters when working from a collaborative perspective. When returning these objects, a pivotal question is who or which community is entitled to receive them. In general, unless an individual can legally prove his or her ownership, the law prefers to return the objects to the entire community. The repatriation process is a difficult one and should be made as transparent as possible, otherwise it risks favouring one community over another, with negative consequences for both the museums and the Indigenous groups involved. Many museums, in order to facilitate the process for Native communities as well as to provide information for museum professionals

2 This paper does not address the repatriation debate. On this topic see Bouquet 2012.

3 The origin and goals of the 1992 Canadian report are discussed in Rossi 2008. In response to the Canadian report, Museum Australia (formerly the Council of Australian Museum Associations) produced a document stating that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders have the right to self-determine their cultural property, and that museums are obligated to help them. This document focuses not only on the repatriation of sacred objects and human remains, but seeks to identify strategies that museums can use to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into their day-to-day practices and exhibit design. Another important benchmark was the *International Conference on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights of Indigenous People*, held in 1993 in New Zealand, which in producing recommendations for states, nations and international agencies about human remains and cultural objects, “both politicized collections and helped to shift the locus of authority from ‘experts’ to source communities” (Bouquet 2012, 153).

seeking a model for their own institutions, post instructions for requesting the return of cultural items on their websites.⁴

3 Digital Technologies and Source Communities

Over the past twenty years, in response to legal, social and political movements that emphasized dialogue, negotiation and debate about the restitution of human remains to Indigenous communities, the term ‘repatriation’ has become a priority for anthropologists, museum curators and members of Native communities. Looking back on the earliest instances of repatriation after many years, it is difficult now to attribute a single meaning to this term: “The diversity of Indigenous colonial histories and contemporary legal and social climates in settler nations has produced a varied landscape of practices that can be termed repatriation” (Bell et al. 2013, 3).

Mary Bouquet defines ‘repatriation’ as an

umbrella term which, when applied to museums, connotes the restoring, returning, repairing, replacing and renewing of objects and images as well as relationships that compose them. Restitution and repatriation [...] reflect changing understandings of how this material is embedded in the social world. (Bouquet 2012)

More or less every country in the world that has lived under colonial dominion has seen a rapid diffusion of repatriation projects in collaboration with Indigenous communities.⁵ Collaboration, sharing, restitution and community have become the keywords for any project aspiring to ‘political correctness’ and hoping to attract the government’s attention and financing.⁶ Some of this financing has supported the creation of databases and infrastructures that facilitate online collaboration with the often geographically distant source communities,⁷ as well as forms of what is known as ‘digital repatriation’.

4 To give just a few examples: the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, the Aboriginal Heritage Unit at the Australian Museum in Sydney, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa (now Canadian Museum of History).

5 To provide another example and broaden the horizon, in 2008 a huge digital archive, the ATSIDA (Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Data Archive), was created in Australia. ATSIDA is a specialized trusted research data management facility for Australian Indigenous research data and is managed by the UTS Library.

6 It was this climate that led to the rise of collaborative museography in museums. On this see Phillips 2003.

7 “The term ‘source communities’ (sometimes referred to as ‘originating communities’) refers both these groups in the past when artifacts were collected, as well as to their descendants today. [...] Most importantly, the concept recognizes that artifacts play an

While physical return was, and remains, appropriate and necessary for some objects, many Native nations and Indigenous communities around the world could not house, did not have proper storage facilities for, or internal politics precluded the safe return of, physical objects. In such scenario, digital repatriation has emerged as an alternative to physical repatriation akin to and in tandem with what has been termed visual repatriation – the practice of sharing copies of visual materials in archives and museums (Bell et al. 2013, 5).

In 2000, while I was in Vancouver conducting my Ph.D. research, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia had just begun a project (complete as of 2010) entitled: *A Partnership of Peoples. A New Infrastructure for Collaborative Research*, thanks to a \$34 million grant funded in large part by the Canada Foundation for Innovation.⁸ This infrastructure is one of the first in the world to establish a connection between scholars, Native communities and museum research through the creation of an ERRN (Electronic Reciprocal Research Network), conceived to facilitate collaborative research between museums and Native communities and to link collections of Northwestern objects scattered around the world. This system has given researchers access to images, objects and information and allowed them to overcome cultural barriers to conducting research (Phillips 2011; Rowley 2013).

This is how the ERRN is described on the website:

The ERRN is an online tool to facilitate reciprocal and collaborative research about cultural heritage from the Northwest Coast of British Columbia. The ERRN enables communities, cultural institutions and researchers to work together. Members can build their own projects, collaborate on shared projects, upload files, hold discussions, research museum projects, and create social networks. For both communities and museums, the ERRN is groundbreaking in facilitating communication and fostering lasting relationships between originating communities and institutions around the world. The ERRN is being co-developed by the Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lō Nation/Tribal Council, the U'mista Cultural Society and the Museum of Anthropology. This collaboration ensures the needs of the originating

important role in the identities of source community members, that source communities have legitimate moral and cultural stakes of forms of ownership in museum collections, and that may have special claims, need or right of access to material heritage held by museums. In this new relationship, museums become stewards of artifacts on behalf of source communities" (Peers, Brown 2003, 2).

⁸ The CFI is an independent corporation created in 1997 by the Canadian government to develop research infrastructures. Its mandate is to strengthen the capacity-building of Canadian universities, colleges, hospitals, and non-profit research centres, and to aid the development of high-quality research and technology for Canadian people. The foundation has been one of the major sponsors of GRASAC (Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts & Cultures).

communities as well as museums are taken into account at all stages of the development.⁹

Like the aforementioned ERRN, the GRASAC — the digital repatriation project I wish to focus on in this paper — is to be understood in this context. GRASAC is an international research group made up of Native researchers, scholars and museum professionals whose goal is collaborative research. The idea at the core of this group is that everyone can benefit from the points of view, skills and expertise of members from different disciplines and areas. The acronym GRASAC refers both to the people who meet regularly, collaborate on projects and exchange ideas, and to the electronic tools developed specifically for the project in order to collaborate and share resources at distance, through the web (Phillips 2013).

GRASAC began as a question that was raised by three researchers in the spring of 2004: would it be possible to use information technology to digitally reunite Great Lakes heritage that is currently scattered across museums and archives in North America and Europe with Aboriginal community knowledge, memory and perspectives? Each researcher came from a different disciplinary background (history, law, art history & anthropology) but saw a common problem, and wondered if there could be a viable common solution. The GRASAC is our solution. The organisation is an international collaborative research partnership of Aboriginal community researchers, museum and archival scholars and university researchers. Members contribute insights and knowledge from their own areas of understanding and in turn benefit from the insights and knowledge of others. We provide online access to digital materials to our research collaborators and especially, to Aboriginal community members. Staff in Aboriginal Cultural Centres and schools can begin to use the research to prepare exhibitions and education kits. Museum curators and university scholars can use the findings to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge into the interpretation of collections, exhibitions, teaching, and research. As part of this project, we also support capacity-building in both the current and future generations of researchers based in Aboriginal communities and elsewhere through training, professional networking, and access to material heritage.¹⁰

4 GRASAC

The GRASAC database is accessible only by group coordinators and approved members who have been assigned a password, essentially museum institutions and tribal members. These limitations are based on three criteria:

9 URL https://www.rrncommunity.org/pages/about#whos_involved (2016-10-01).

10 URL https://grasac.org/gks/gks_about.php (2016-10-01).

- Some of the materials collected by Indigenous communities and stored in the database are considered sacred or sensitive, and therefore public access would be inappropriate;
- Some materials, such as photographic images, have copyright restrictions;
- GRASAC was conceived as a reciprocal tool, with the understanding that community members are not merely passive users and observers, but contribute to it by sharing their knowledge.

On a theoretical level and according to its statement of intent, GRASAC's digital archive is meant to facilitate Indigenous communities' access to cultural property scattered across the world, and allow them to share their knowledge within and through this virtual tool. Based on statistical inquiries into the amount of data within the archive, as well as on comments from Indigenous community members, it appears that this has not happened, since the amount of information present in the database is rather small (Carlton 2010). So far GRASAC has registered over 450 members, either individuals or institutions (myself included, as a 'correspondent' from Italy)¹¹ and more than 4,000 records have been created. When analysing the data, it can be observed that the majority of institutions included in the database have no relationship to Indigenous communities; these are primarily museum institutions and archives (more than 80%). The remaining percentage is composed of Indigenous cultural centres and tribes (Carlton 2010). Thus, the majority of member institutions are museums.

From this, we can observe that a database that was created to facilitate the cooperation and dissemination of knowledge among Indigenous communities and scholars is operating within a network of mostly European museums, and it is these museums that benefit from and utilize it the most. This seems paradoxical, given that the driving motivation for the creation of GRASAC was a desire to acknowledge injustices related to colonialism enacted by Canadian and American (and European) institutions, to the detriment of Indigenous communities. In a recent text some of the promoters of the GRASAC digital archive have admitted the gaps in their program:

Although our database is designed as a collaborative project, a relatively small number of people have been actively contributing. We also come to realize that the resource we have developed could and should serve a wider range of user communities. That includes students, teachers, artists, and members of the general public, both Aboriginal and non-

¹¹ For this project I catalogued and photographed items from the Great Lakes Region held in Italian museums such as: the Museum of Anthropology in Florence, the National Prehistoric and Ethnographic Museum 'L. Pigorini', in Rome (now Museum of Civilizations) and the Beltrami collection in the Natural Science Museum, in Bergamo.

Aboriginal. For these groups other interfaces and formats for presenting data would be more effective. (Bohaker et al. 2015, 48)

At the centre of GRASAC's cataloguing system are the so-called "heritage items".¹² A heritage item "could be an item of material culture, a piece of art, an historic photograph, an archival document, or a video of an elder narrating an oral tradition". The overall structure of information (or the system of records classification) is very similar to that used in Western museums (it is reminiscent of the Italian cataloguing system used by the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation) and is not 'participatory' or 'user friendly'. Rather, it requires that one is already trained in these technologies and possesses a scholarly approach that, ultimately, is linked to the world of collecting and museums, and more in general to Western classificatory systems.¹³ To give an example, the data is organised as follows: each "heritage item" is identified by its name ("Item name"); the name of its creator, if known; the site of production; and a physical description which, along with the item name and identification number, is the most important 'field' in the database. Then there might be inscriptions (such as the date of creation), a history of exchanges, a history of the object's collection and acquisition; a history of exhibits and publications in which the object appeared, and finally information about the record itself, such as the name of the cataloguer. High-resolution photographs portraying the object from multiple angles are attached.

Allow me to question the nature of these new digital products. What does GRASAC represent? What kinds of activities is it undertaking? How does it function and for whose benefit?

By applying the close, indiscreet gaze of ethnographic research to digital cultural products such as GRASAC, certain urgent questions arise, such as: Who are these products meant for? How can the concept of 'source communities' be further clarified? What does the term "source community" mean in the context of the Indigenous groups these digital repatriation projects were created for? For GRASAC, I believe the term 'community' defines a small group of intellectuals, editors and Indigenous students.

12 "We avoid using the terms 'artifact' or 'object' despite the fact that both are in wide-spread use in the museum world. Many of the items housed in museums are viewed as living beings, or as being embodied with life energy by different Aboriginal cultures. Referring to them as 'objects' or 'artifacts' can be painful or perceived as deeply offensive. The principal architects of this project have therefore identified material culture as a workable compromise to describe items of this class, for the moment". URL https://grasac.org/gks/pdfs/GRASAC_GKS_Design_Principles.pdf (2017-12-15).

13 On this regard Ruth Phillips notes: "Finding ways of naming, presenting, and structuring Aboriginal Heritage that privilege neither Aboriginal nor Western traditions at the expense of the other is one of the major underlying challenges of projects such as the GKS and the RRN" (Phillips 2011, 293).

What emerges first and foremost is a nondiscriminatory, if somewhat vague, use of the concept of source communities. Such a generic, ambiguous and indeed 'politically correct' concept suits the logic of many of the collaborative projects that have spread rapidly throughout the postcolonial world.¹⁴ "Community is an ambiguous and abstract expression: one does never know entirely to what it precisely refers. It's a normative rather than a descriptive notion and dangerously suitable to holistic and unanimous representations of a territory" (Dei 2014, 56).

Interest in artifacts from the Great Lakes region is attributable to the history of colonization itself (Miller 1989). The populations in the area, for obvious geographical reasons, were among the first to come in contact with Europeans, and as a result have commonly been viewed as less 'authentic' or 'traditional' because of the rapid acculturation they experienced. For this reason, they have received less attention from researchers than other Native groups considered 'uncorrupted' (such as the tribes of the Arctic and Subarctic).

Interest in the Great Lakes region is linked to ways in which the notion of 'cultural authenticity' has changed over time, as well as the current interest in cultural mixing, hybridity, globalization and cultural traditions. As the creators of GRASAC emphasize, the Great Lakes region's long history of contact with Europeans makes it fertile research ground for highlighting phenomena of cultural exchange and circulation of material products (artifacts and objects).

5 Digital Biographies

A further method of reflecting on enterprises such as GRASAC is to evaluate the results they have achieved. The observations of Edwards and Hart, in their well-known article concerning a box of ethnographic photographs housed in the Pitt Rivers museum, are especially illuminating. As the authors state in their research:

The specific focus of this chapter is Box 54 in the *Mixed Geographical* series of the photograph collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. It is a synthetic object of linked but separate parts (the photographs on their card mounts) that have interacted, and continue to interact, with each other and with the institution in which they are housed, to produce a succession of meanings that are broader and more complex than a simple sum of the various parts (Edwards, Hart 2004b, 49).

Box 54 allows me, through the interplay of close and distant observation,

¹⁴ UNESCO applies the same ambiguity to the concept of community when defining heritage 'products'.

to question why the GRASAC database, a fully established 'digital product' formed and organised around digital reproductions of objects that exist in physical form in museums, institutions and archives, looks the way it does.

What actions, thoughts and processes gave rise to its present shape? Paraphrasing Edwards and Hart, I propose taking a closer look at the anthropological, classificatory and exhibitionary principles on which GRASAC was built. In order to do this, it is necessary to shift the focus onto the archives and museums that have allowed these objects to operate in a changing context (that of the digital database) and assume an electronic identity, rather than the individual objects themselves. The biographical pattern described by Kopytoff is pivotal in this regard as he states:

In doing a biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: what, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its status and in its period and culture, and how these possibilities are realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life", and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (Kopytoff 1986, 66-7)

So, while the content of GRASAC consists primarily of the objects (or rather digital files of the objects) and can be largely treated as 'ethnographic material', the process of dematerialisation and subsequent reinsertion into this new 'concretion' (the digital database) has lent the objects a new status within a certain organisational structure. In this sense, GRASAC establishes connections between artifacts that did not exist prior to the development of this organising principle (as elements of collections gathered in different eras and by different people, and therefore having different cultural biographies), while other connections (such as geographical sites of production) are reinforced.

Since GRASAC reorganised dematerialised objects (these digital objects were, in fact, created for this purpose) without erasing any pre-existing classifications or relationships – the 'real' objects are still exactly where the researchers found them – we can say that to some extent GRASAC replaced the objects' previous forms. This created a sort of doubling effect, which is the logical consequence of any digital repatriation: the co-existence of the same object (physical and digital) in two different environments. One exists within a physical context: the archive or museum, the other in a digital database, a virtual location that can be accessed anywhere and at any time (by those permitted access). The structure of relationships between the objects is very different in each of these settings. Museums and archives use systems of relationships that are older

and more established, while GRASAC enacts new systems, being itself the product of diverse forms of collecting. GRASAC gathers together, for the first time in history, objects collected in different historical periods by different personalities in the same geographical area, the Canadian Great Lakes region. From this perspective, GRASAC and other databases like it stand out as innovative forms of digital collection based on a new premise: to assemble artifacts scattered across the world. The results of such activities are represented by new collections of data linked by sets of relationships coexisting (and at times interfering) with those used to organise the physical objects, and organised under different principles (geography in the case of GRASAC). In line with what Edwards and Hart write about their "Box 54", GRASAC could be defined as a "synthetic" or "arch-synthetic" (Edwards, Hart 2004b) object alike an archive or a museum because these:

They do more than put objects in their proper space or make a place for them. They are active environments for participating in the histories of objects, active environments that ultimately shape histories, through the preserving contexts, that they themselves constitute. (2004b, 49)

Some objects enter archives and museums and remain in them as discrete singular entities. For the purposes of our argument here, they can be termed 'natural' - and old master drawing, for instance, a run of correspondence in private papers or an album of photographs. Synthetic objects are those objects upon which sense and order have been imposed in their institutional lifetime, creating something that was not there before, making a new entity both intellectually and physically in a way that goes beyond simple taxonomic descriptions, moving into a set of changing values and, further, into a framework of policies, strategies and practices. Within this set of definitions, museums and archives themselves are arch-synthetic objects (Edwards, Hart 2004, 49).

The multiple histories and meanings that an enterprise of this kind produces are evident; perhaps every collection of 'things' in any era has its own multiplicity to investigate. Not unlike a museum, GRASAC, with its structuring and accumulation of heritage pieces, is an artifact that speaks volumes about those who designed it: part mirror and part window (Ames 1992) into the real and imagined Great Lakes Region. I would argue that these kinds of digital products, compared to other cultural artifacts such as objects or archival documents, are characterized by a certain degree of autonomy. Products like GRASAC, which is an 'arch-collection', are relatively independent from the collections that house the physical objects. Once created, they take on a life and history of their own, separate from that of the objects themselves. Digital files of physical objects are more than just simple reproductions or copies, and can be read as a further

phase of the objects' biography (Kopytoff 1986).

To take a closer look: the heritage objects must come from the Great Lakes Region (this is the criteria for inclusion in the database). They are identified and selected from various parts of the world, then photographed, scanned, filmed, measured, digitized and finally catalogued. They go through a process that strips away their physical presence and transforms them into intangible objects. They enter a new, virtual temporality and dimension (the database), accessible at any time and anywhere. They acquire a new identity and autonomy, thanks to the database. In other words, these digital objects are distinct from the real (physical) objects and are embedded in new sets of relationships that connect them to other digital objects. In short, GRASAC can be considered as a new, vast collection, 'arch-collection' of artifacts (more than 4,000 heritage items at present) drawn from collections amassed in other historical eras, according to a variety of different collecting criteria.

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