

“Posterity is Now,” Commentary in *Museum Anthropology* 42(1)5-13.

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Abstract

Guided by the notion that posterity is now, this is a call to take seriously the experiences of museum staff working in collaboration and consultation with Native peoples and to reorient the purpose of the museum to the values embedded in these interactions. Namely, this statement recognizes that heritage work in museum collections is not only about cultural identity and the past, but more often it is oriented toward the present and future of Indigenous communities to benefit their health and well-being. [NAGPRA, tribal consultation, collaboration, museum collections]

The review (Shannon 2016) was almost due. I was curled up on a couch with the book while doing fieldwork with the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation in North Dakota when I read a sentence that has stayed with me ever since. I have brought it to my work, my teaching, and recently to a public talk.¹ The words have become a mnemonic for what I see to be the way forward for museums with collections originating from Indigenous peoples: posterity is *now*.

This is my paraphrase of a statement I read by former Glenbow Museum Director Robert Janes in *We Are Coming Home: Repatriation and the Restoration of Blackfoot Cultural Confidence* (Conaty 2015). We read many books, but a single sentence among hundreds can stand out, strike a chord, illuminate or encapsulate an idea you have carried around for a long time—an idea that reflects your own practice and can guide the practice of others. Janes did that for me when he wrote of the return of medicine bundles to the Blackfoot Nation: “The museum profession is fond of saying that ‘museums keep things for posterity.’ By 1998, we had concluded that *posterity had arrived*—both for the Blackfoot and for the Glenbow” (Janes 2015, 255, emphasis added).²

My intention here, following Janes, is to impart a call to redefine the “who” and the “when” of posterity. Posterity is not (or not only) the general public in an unidentified future: it is Indigenous peoples, today. The purpose of this reorientation relates to what many of us who work closely in collections with Native peoples already have come to learn: that more so than for connecting with their past, collections and heritage work is about maintaining well-being in their communities in planning for their future, and future generations.³

This reorientation has been going on in scholarship and in the everyday practice of collections visits and consultations with Native peoples in the United States for some time. Native peoples, anthropologists, and museum professionals have all influenced a transformation in museology in the United States to embrace this perspective. Change has been driven by Native peoples’ activism, critical scholarship, and interactions with us during our fieldwork; by anthropologists’ critiques of colonialism and representation; by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), which mandates consultation between museums and US Tribes; and by the embodied practice of museum staff working with Native American items in their care, shaped through consultations and instructions in proper care from an Indigenous perspective. Accordingly, our ways of seeing and relating to the items in our care have changed over time (Krmpotich 2015; Shannon 2018).

Another director’s comment has also stayed with me through the years. Former National Museum of the American Indian Director Rick West, Jr. (Cheyenne) once said something along the lines of, “We *hate* museums because they have our stuff. We *love* museums because they have our stuff.” This contradiction lies at the center of contemporary museum anthropology and collections management. It points to the history, trauma, tensions, and potential of museum collections of items from Indigenous communities. It also shows how museums both keep items valued by Native peoples safe as well as house them apart from

their originating communities.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, museums bought, and sometimes took illegally, sacred and treasured items from communities under duress at a time when their religious practices were outlawed and government policies were aimed at the systematic breakdown of Native American lands, families, and cultural knowledge transmission. Given this history, something extraordinary has evolved in anthropology and museum practice in North America. The curator of North American ethnology at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History (NMNH), Gwyn Isaac, and I have a hunch: that the people who are accessing and working with Native American collections most frequently in North America are Native peoples. There are many factors that drive this increased contact, including the requirement of consultation between museums and Native communities under NAGPRA. However, it is important to be specific about the history and barriers that nonetheless make it difficult for Native peoples to view a museum as a welcoming place or trust anthropologists to be allies.⁴

To many, especially the general public, the museum is a revered institution for truth-telling. For others, whose ancestors and sacred items are held within its walls, it is a mausoleum. This seems an apt metaphor that helps those of us who work in and on behalf of museums to better understand an Indigenous point of view. But it is *not* a metaphor. The estimated number of Indian bodies in all US university, museum, and laboratory collections subject to repatriation laws is 300,000 to 600,000 (McKeown 2013, 10). A historic photograph of the hall of the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum shows walls covered with drawers from floor to ceiling, which held 18,000 American Indian human remains/Native ancestors (McKeown 2013, 14); today, under the leadership of Gwyn Isaac and Josh Bell, the NMNH hosts the Recovering Voices Project, connecting Native

communities to collections to aid in language revitalization—a key element to ensuring Indigenous wellbeing and futures.

Historically, as many museum anthropologists know, dead and living Indigenous peoples were seen, and treated, as specimens by museums and anthropologists. Many people know the story of Ishi (Scheper-Hughes 2001; NMNH n.d.); fewer know of Minik (“Mene”; Figure 1). Minik’s story seems apocryphal but it is actually *true*. While this may not be the literal experience for contemporary Native Americans, the history and trauma associated with being dehumanized as specimens and spectacles reverberates through the generations. It helps us to understand the mindset of the times. For example, in 1897, Arctic explorer Robert Peary brought six Inuit, including Minik and his father Qisuk, from their Greenland home to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. They were described as “live specimens.”



Figure 1. “Mene with bike in 1898. This boy was brought to New York by Lieut. Peary.” (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM#2004.29.2973)

To grasp this troubled history, one need only see the photograph of Minik and Qisuk standing in front of a city apartment in jaunty hats and clothing suited to the city, juxtaposed with photographs of them standing naked, side by side on a pedestal, first staring at the camera and then in profile in Ales Hrdlička's 1901 article "An Eskimo Brain" in the *American Anthropologist*.⁵ Hrdlička's caption reads, "Photographed on their admission to Bellevue Hospital," and the essay begins, "The brain in question is that of Kishu... who died of acute general tuberculosis... [and] was chief of his tribe; he measured 1.64 m. in height, weighed about 170 lbs., was muscular, and in every respect normally developed." Later in the article there are images of Qisuk's brain and detailed measurements of its parts. The concluding sentence is, "The marked differences of the specimens described by Chudinski and in this paper from those of the whites, as well as among themselves, makes future acquisition of Eskimo brains very desirable" (Hrdlička 1901, 500).

After Qisuk and the other members of the party died from tuberculosis in 1897, the museum director took Minik in and adopted him. Minik later found out that the museum had faked his father's burial and that he had actually seen his bones on display. This summary does no justice to the story or the larger history of Minik's life, which is told in *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, the New York Eskimo* by Kenn Harper (2000). But it's clear from a January 6, 1907, *New York World* article titled "Give Me My Father's Body" and a *San Francisco Examiner* article from May 9, 1909, titled "Why Arctic Explorer Peary's Neglected Eskimo Boy Wants to Shoot Him," that Native peoples have been criticizing museums and anthropologists from the beginning, protesting displays of their ancestors and their sacred items. In 1993, the American Museum of Natural History, under the efforts of anthropologist Ian Tattersall, returned the skeletons of Minik's relatives for burial in Qunaaq, the Inuit village closest to where the Inuit party had been convinced to

travel south (Kaufman 1993; Trueheart 1993).

Objections since these times weren't just about inappropriate items on display but also addressed how their peoples were portrayed (e.g., Fitzhugh 1997). Exhibits about Native Americans often made it seem like they were people of the past rather than peoples with a present and future. Also, they were *treated* as if only their past was to be valued. As a cultural anthropologist who is also a curator and museum anthropologist, I acknowledge and am confronted by this history often. Through the teachings of Indigenous peoples and with their participation in the museum, these representations have changed. This has been going on for decades; today it is the norm, and expected (Thomas 2010).

Taking Indigenous ways of knowing seriously, we come to understand that heritage work is not just about connecting to the past—it is also about maintaining the health and well-being of communities in the present and future. Exemplary projects that have moved productively in this direction include the following:

- *Recovering Voices*, mentioned above, which, for the Cheyenne, will “inform curriculum design for the tribe’s Language, Culture and Heritage, and Health and Wellness program” (Figure 2).⁶
- The multi-institutional Health and Culture Research Group organized by Gwyn Isaac through the National Museum of Natural History, which addresses the relationship between health and culture, bringing together American Indian scholars working in public, environmental, educational, and mental health fields alongside federal agents from the National Institutes of Health and the Indian Health Service (Isaac 2017).
- The Memory, Meaning-Making, and Collections research partnership between the University of Toronto and the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, which was started in 2013 and is led by Aboriginal seniors living in the city (Figure 3). Through local and Smithsonian museum visits, the group focuses on how interactions with collection items “can affect memory and heritage processes” and create a sense of belonging (Krpmotich 2016).
- The practice of hosting museum exhibits high-lighting initiatives that support community well-being, such as a 2020 collaborative museum exhibition being developed by the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, the Nuxalk First Nation,

and administrators of the Nuxalk radio station launched in 2014. They have chosen to highlight their radio station with its mission to promote Nuxalk language and sovereignty and “contribute positively to physical, mental, spiritual and emotional well-being” of their community. Banchi Hanuse explains, “The idea of starting a radio station was put forward as a way of educating and assisting our community in the process of decolonization and resurgence” (Kramer 2017).

- The Blackfoot Shirts Project, a multi-institutional project instigated by Blackfoot ceremonial leaders. Five historic shirts held in British museums were loaned to the Glenbow Museum for exhibition and for visits—outside of glass cases—with more than five hundred community members, which “triggered the transmission of cultural knowledge and the strengthening of identity in Blackfoot participants” (Brown and Peers 2013).
- The Coming Home Program, a long-term loan collaboration with Poeh Cultural Center and Tewa Pueblo community members run by Cynthia Chavez Lamar at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The director of the Poeh Center, Karl Duncan, explains what the return of the pots in the NMAI’s collection means to them: “As the traditions were lost, what we’re trying to do here at the Poeh is bring those traditions back because they help heal us. So hopefully, as you bring back these traditions, bring back these reminders, they’ll enable Native people, enable Native communities, to be healthier, to be happier. To solve a lot of the problems that we have going on today.”⁷



Figure 2. Gwyn Isaac, Klint Ericson, Octavius Seowtewa (Zuni), Curtis Quam (Zuni), Eldred Quam (Zuni), and Raylan Edaakie (Zuni) during the Zuni Community Research visit, September 2016, in the NMNH Anthropology collections (photo by Keren Yairi, courtesy of Recovering Voices).



Figure 3. The Memory, Meaning-Making, and Collections group and museum staff in the conservation lab at what is now the Canadian Museum of History in 2015. From left: Mary Lou Smoke, Karyne Holmes, Morgan Baillargeon, Dan Smoke, Jacqui Lavalley, Connor Pion, Heather Howard, Lynne Howarth, and Evelyn Wolfe. Photo by Cara Krmpotich.

Many of us have changed how we relate to and work with Native peoples *and collections*. I also think it's time that we go a step further and reorient the purpose of the museum *as a whole*. As the examples above show, the outcome of our collaborative work is sometimes neither an exhibition nor a product intended for the general public. This initiative toward healthier and happier communities is a meaningful and just purpose to guide our reimagining of museum missions and audiences. I present my experience from working with the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation to highlight one of the many forms this reorientation may look like in practice.

Collaborative Research with the MHA Nation

In the United States, much has been written about the role of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990 in transforming museum anthropology and relations with Native peoples. As Suzan Shown Harjo explains, NAGPRA is the

unfinished business of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978.⁸ Until its passage, Native religious practices had been outlawed; afterwards, Native peoples could practice their traditions, but many of the items needed to do so were in museums, and their ancestors were not at rest, often separated from the items that accompanied them in burial. Both laws represent the movement to address injustices and to support spiritual well-being in Native communities. NAGPRA is at once human, civil, and religious rights legislation, requiring museums to consult with tribes to enable the return of Native ancestors or human remains, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. The return of sacred items is explicitly about putting them back into use today.

By requiring that museums consult with tribes, NAGPRA has literally brought Native community members and museum staff to the table together, in the same room. This really matters! I have many examples from different Native Nations to think through, but here I will focus on my most recent work with the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation (also known as MHA Nation or the Three Affiliated Tribes). In my brief remarks, I want to emphasize that *repatriation is an excellent foundation for research*: it is a start, not an end, to productive relationships with communities.

The three tribes of the MHA came together in the nineteenth century and now live on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. Our museum (the University of Colorado's Museum of Natural History) has more than 400 items associated with the Rev. Harold Case, a missionary who worked on the reservation from the 1920s to the 1960s. My relationships with members of MHA Nation began during a consultation with a tribal historical preservation officer and the tribal historian about sacred items in our university museum collection; our relationship evolved over time into a documentary film project, an interactive website hosting collections images and

photographic archives, a series of community-based filmmaking workshops, and a forthcoming comic book about repatriation (cf. Atalay et al. 2017).⁹ This relationship and our working together continue to evolve. At each step of the way, we checked in with community members, asking two very basic questions: What would you like (us) to do? How should we proceed?

NAGPRA liaisons Calvin Grinnell (MHA Tribal Historian and president of the State Historical Society of North Dakota) and Elgin Crows Breast (MHA Tribal Historic Preservation Officer) visited our museum in 2007 for a consultation regarding Native ancestors (human remains); at the time, they had expressed interest in some ethnographic items in our collection that might also fall under the law. After I was hired in 2009, I invited them to participate in a NAGPRA consultation/documentation grant. In 2011, we were awarded the grant and began the consultation process, which led to the repatriation of sacred objects in 2014 (Figure 4).

When I asked whether they wanted us to do any further research about the MHA collections in our museum, they invited me to meet with a small group of elders and tribal historians in October 2011. With a firm commitment to developing a co-directed research project, we asked the group whether they wanted us to do any additional research about the MHA collection in our museum, and if so, on what? They all agreed on a particular subject that was a surprise to us: they wanted us to research the “life and times of Reverend Case,” who had amassed the collection during his time at Fort Berthold and whose family had donated it to our museum. This advisory group not only explained *what* they wanted us to research, but also *how*: they wanted us to conduct oral history video interviews, and they insisted that an edited documentary would be an important outcome of our work together.



Figure 4. Calvin Grinnell and Jen Shannon at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History, preparing sacred items for the journey home in 2014.

When we posed this to Case’s grandchildren, they wholeheartedly agreed to this focus and offered to share their private photo collection in service of the partnership as well. Together with the MHA advisory group and the Case family, we determined the outputs of our work together to include the return of sacred objects through NAGPRA, an oral history video archive about the life and times of Reverend Case to be housed at both UCMNH and the Three Tribes Museum, and an edited documentary. In addition, we created a password-protected interactive website for Case family and MHA community members. This resource includes images of all MHA items in our museum collection, the documentary, and images from a new photographic archive created from the digitized Case family photos, as well as more than two thousand scanned archival photos of from the Case archives at the State Historical Society of North Dakota.

Discussions with MHA community members about the completed documentary inspired us to develop a series of community-based video workshops that I ran in the summer of 2017

with ethnographic filmmaker Christian Hammons and MHA community members Elijah Benson and Justin Deegan. Whether reclaiming sacred items to enable spiritual practice, using video to recount the history of relocation in their community and explain to young people how that terrible time feels similar to the current oil boom, sharing previously inaccessible photographs of ancestors and relatives, or providing a practice and platform for community members to tell their own stories in the midst of an oversaturated and negative media environment, all of these community-directed projects with MHA Nation members are aimed at supporting the conditions for community well-being.¹⁰

Not recognizing this larger framework from the start, I continued to think of what we were doing as decolonizing methods, or decolonizing practice. While this framework is very important and relevant, I have come to see it as a view from within the museum, from within the disciplines and institutions that represent the troubled history I mentioned above. The language of decolonizing methods, forcefully and productively circulated by Maori scholar Linda Tuhuwai Smith (1999), and decolonizing museums, highlighted by Native American scholar Amy Lonetree (2012), is common in the language and articulation of collaborative work and museum anthropology. But today, the discourse and framework of well-being comes from community members themselves: it is how *they* define what is valuable in our work in museum anthropology, and if communities direct the research, that is the ultimate aim: to increase well-being and in so doing safeguard future generations.

Reimagining the Museum's Purpose

I have been doing some form of collaborative museum work since 1999. But it was my experience in 2012 with two Native community members whom I cannot identify that

stopped me in my tracks. That encounter has resonated powerfully in a way that exemplifies my hopes for a reorientation of the possibilities and purpose of the museum. Despite some false assumptions and a rocky start to their visit to our museum to review collections from their community, at the end of our day together one of them asked how and whether people still donate to collections, noting she had additional items at home that they might want preserved for future generations of the family. The following year, she returned with another family member to visit the collection again.

Whether or not this family ends up donating anything to our museum is not important. The fact that it arose even as a possibility signals a massive shift in museum–Native community relations. This shift is exemplified by the 2011 gift of twenty-four items to the UBC Museum of Anthropology by the family of Kwakwaka'wakw nobility Mabel Stanley.¹¹ The understanding between Ms. Stanley's family and the museum is that the items will be accessible to the family and that the museum will create an exhibition around them. This change in perspective, from museums as sequestering Native communities' material culture to providing access and community-guided stewardship of their heritage, is a sea change in relations between Indigenous peoples and museums from where we began with the example of Minik. It is fostered through openness, practicing trust and reciprocity, and welcoming access to collections. We can and should teach that these things are important, but it's in the doing—the embodied practice, working together—that really changes us and how we see our work, how we relate to the collections in our care, and how Native peoples view museums. We learn that there are appropriate ways and times to keep items in our care and times when they should be returned; consultation and collaboration are essential in discerning the appropriate course of action.

In addition, building trust and maintaining it is key to our work together. Originally the

central story in this essay, briefly summarized above, was more than two pages long. I shared with a member of the advisory group a copy of my recounting of our day together in the museum, and she asked me not to include it. She explained what they had been holding back out of respect—that alongside the positive feelings there was also anger and frustration. A good, productive interpersonal moment within the museum does not negate the complex emotions that shape the encounter and its aftermath as we reflect on our experiences.

Our phone conversation, months later, represented a better, more complicated story about the nuances, care, and suppressed hard feelings that we sometimes bring to our relations within these historically fraught spaces and power imbalances. I wanted this additional experience to be part of the story as well. The story seemed central to the point of this essay, and in fact both experiences, combined, are what instigated its inception. But I did not include the details of our experience and instead focused on their absence.

That is what is critical to this reorientation: if you are really going to share authority, that means when you offer up something for review and the answer is “no,” you must take “no” as an answer.¹² So the essay comes to you in this form, and I am still learning from my ongoing relationship with this family. As I do my work and keep in mind my commitment to the idea that “posterity is now,” I want to acknowledge how this relationship has offered meaningful and important teachings as I continue to learn the various ways in which we can demonstrate and support that commitment.

Posterity is now—it is Indigenous peoples. They are inviting those of us who work in museums to participate in their efforts to increase the health and wellbeing in their communities. So, can we reimagine the museum, alongside Native community members, as a place that enables relations and practices that support community health and well-being, and museum anthropologists as allies in doing so? As examples in this essay suggest, it is through

this collaborative work and shared commitment that our research is expanding in new and exciting ways.

Notes

1. It was my invitation to speak at a seminar at the Pitt Rivers Museum that provided me the opportunity to speak out loud the words I had been carrying around and on which this commentary is based. The Pitt Rivers Museum has publicly shared some great examples of this kind of work—I am reminded of the Haida joyfully playing a game in the museum with items in the collection in the video *Everything Was Carved* (available at <https://vimeo.com/26104413> or through the museum’s website at <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haida>.)
2. For a discussion of the assumptions embedded in the meaning of posterity and its intended audience, see Curtis (2006), who discusses Western views of museums versus Indigenous notions of keeping places. Curtis argues that “repatriation can lead to an increase in knowledge and understanding, rather than its destruction” (2006, 123) and provides suggestions for how museums can “reconcile a responsibility to their audiences, to source communities and to universal ideals of scholarship” (2006, 124).
3. The World Health Organization’s definition of well-being is the condition “in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (see http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/, accessed 2/22/2018).
4. For an excellent resource to prepare museums and Indigenous communities to work together, see the SAR Museum+Community Guidelines for museums, and Community+Museum guidelines for Native communities, available at <https://sarweb.org/guidelinesforcollaboration/index.html>, accessed 11/2/2018/.
5. I chose not to include these photographs here; in my public presentation I showed them (with modesty panels) and the audience had a visceral reaction. Our bodies react to theirs, first with a smile in response to what initially appears to be a typical family-like portrait, then with horror as we see them so exposed, objectified, and vulnerable.
6. See <https://recoveringvoices.si.edu/research/crg.html>, accessed 3/9/2018.
7. From <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ASFgGofBeU>, accessed 3/9/2018. This video describes the Coming Home Project, a collaboration among the NMAI, Pojoaque Pueblo, and the Poeh Cultural Center.
8. Personal communication, November 23, 2004 (see also Shannon 2014: xii, and Preucel 2011 for an oral history interview with Harjo about AIRFA and NAGPRA).

9. For the interactive website, login information is available at http://cuconsult.herokuapp.com/users/sign_in. For the documentary film, see <https://vimeo.com/118650096>. For more information about the video workshops, see <http://mhacollaborativefilm.weebly.com/> (including free, downloadable curriculum), <https://vimeo.com/mhacol> laborativefilm, or <https://www.facebook.com/mhacollaborativefilm/>.
10. Mr. Crows Breast and Mr. Grinnell have co-authored an article about how “landscapes of origin are central to the continuity of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara cultural identity and spiritual health” (Murray et. al. 2011).
11. “Don’t Give It Up! The Lives and Stories of the Mabel Stanley Collection,” available at <http://moa.ubc.ca/portfolio/dont-give-it-up/>, accessed July 11, 2017.
12. I talk about failure as a necessary part of collaborative research and the righteous demands from MHA community members for research to benefit their community in Shannon 2017.

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