
'Ceremonies of Renewal'

Visits, Relationships, and Healing in the Museum Space

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Access to heritage objects in museum collections can play an important role in healing from colonial trauma for indigenous groups by facilitating strengthened connections to heritage, to ancestors, to kin and community members in the present, and to identity. This article analyzes how touch and other forms of sensory engagement with five historic Blackfoot shirts enabled Blackfoot people to address historical traumas and to engage in 'ceremonies of renewal', in which knowledge, relationships, and identity are strengthened and made the basis of well-being in the present. The project, which was a museum loan and exhibition with handling sessions before the shirts were placed on displays, implies the obligation of museums to provide culturally relevant forms of access to heritage objects for indigenous communities.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Blackfoot, healing, indigenous communities, museums, touch

In 2010, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford (PRM) loaned five historic Blackfoot shirts (figure 1) to the Glenbow and Galt museums in Alberta, Canada. The project team¹ held handling sessions at each museum, enabling over five hundred Blackfoot people to see and touch the shirts, unmediated by glass cases. Collected in 1841, and decorated with porcupine quillwork, paint, and human and horse hairlocks, the shirts are important heritage objects. For Blackfoot people,² they are also ancestors, embodying the spirits of those who made and used the shirts. Having been absent so long from their communities—along with nearly all hairlock shirts, which were collected during the colonial era—their presence and multisensory engagements with them provoked powerful responses.

The Blackfoot Shirts Project was intended to encourage the transmission of cultural knowledge within Blackfoot communities by using the provocation of touch to encourage participant discussions. The handling sessions went beyond this, addressing what Connerton (2011: 16) calls historical traumas, "those circumstances of mourning where the benefit of rituals and rules do not obtain." Connerton's definition of "routinised forms of suffering, against which certain categories of persons are relatively protected but to which others, the poor and the defeated, are especially exposed" (2011: 16) applies to Blackfoot experiences of colonialism. Globally, indigenous groups suffer poorer physical and mental health and lower income and education levels in relation to mainstream populations, as a result of assimilation pressures. One factor in the destabilization of indigenous communities has been the removal of heritage objects to museums. The

Figure 1. Blackfoot shirt with painted war honors, acquired 1841 by Sir George Simpson and Edward Hopkins. Elk or deer hide, sinew, human hair, horse hair, paint. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1893.67.1.



loss of symbols of identity and the interruption of social processes in which the making and use of material culture is embedded significantly weakened the transmission of cultural knowledge. Touching the shirts encouraged lively discussions, but went beyond this to strengthen participants' sense of connection to the past, to shared cultural knowledge and historical memory, and to each other. I argue that this process of strengthening relationships through multisensory engagements with historic museum 'objects' facilitated social healing for the Blackfoot people who engaged with the project. The restoration of relationships—with ancestors, with heritage, and with family and community members in the present—has been identified as crucial to healing after social loss (Miller and Parrott 2009) and historical trauma (Waldram 2008; Chandler and Lalonde 2008).

Transforming relationships is also an issue between museums and formerly colonized peoples. The Blackfoot Shirts Project is part of a movement to develop relationships of equality between museums and indigenous communities, and more broadly for museums to position themselves as ethical institutions, spaces of communication within which to foster awareness of social issues (Sandell 2007; Janes and Conaty 2005; Marstine 2011), and places of engagement between disparate groups where challenging conversations might occur (Clifford 1997). One strand of these processes of change has been the emergence of projects that seek to reconnect heritage objects in museums with indigenous communities of origin, or source communities (Peers and Brown 2003).

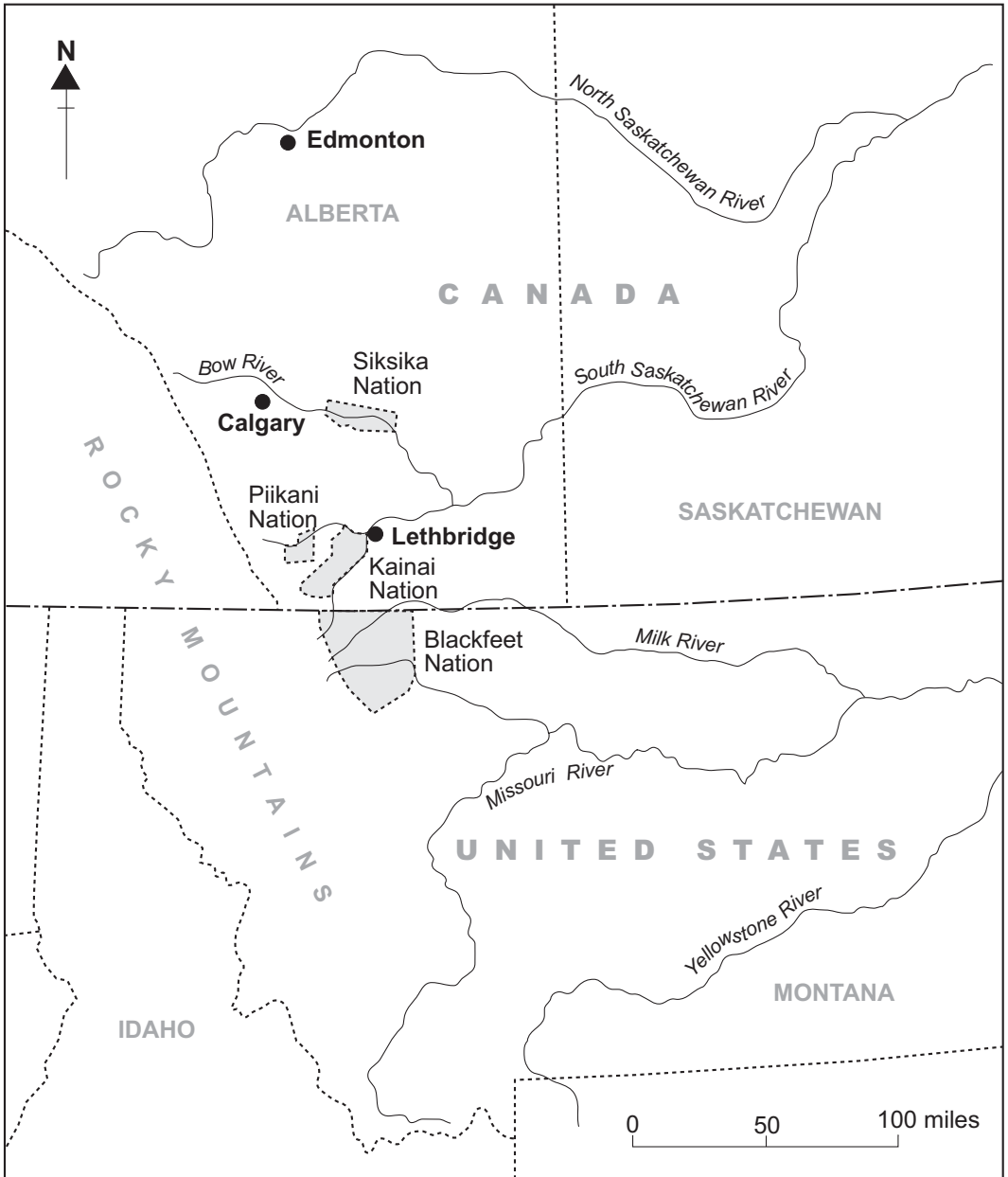
Explications of such developments are often set within postcolonial theory, which examines issues of power and voice within unequal relations of power. Such perspectives are valid, but risk obscuring particular indigenous cultural perspectives and the way they inflect reconnection projects. I agree with Elizabeth Edwards (2006: 28) that “it is necessary to destabilize those dominant theories and find other tools and methodologies that draw on indigenous categories and practices.” As the Blackfoot Shirts Project unfolded, it became clear that Blackfoot people were aware of the power dynamics inherent in museum-based projects, and that they participated within these constraints to pursue their own goals. It also became clear that they saw the shirts, and engagements with them, through Blackfoot cultural perspectives rather than museological or postcolonial ones. The shirts, in Blackfoot thought, are potentially animate, associated with the spirits of those who made and wore them, and whose bodies were used to make them. Objects are not generically animate in Blackfoot thought: spirits associated with them might leave if treated disrespectfully, in which case they would become inanimate.³ Respectful treatment involves particular forms of sociality: relationships, as Cynthia Chambers and Kainai scholar Narcisse Blood explain (2009: 267), are “nurtured through unimpeded access, continued exchange of knowledge, and ceremonies of renewal such as visiting and exchanging of gifts and stories.” Chambers and Blood refer to such events as ‘ceremonies of renewal’. Renewing relationships through visits, gifts, and the exchange of knowledge and stories provides a metaphor for museum-based reconnection projects. It also provides a culturally specific theoretical basis—one that goes beyond postcolonial theory—for understanding how engagements with heritage objects might be healing for indigenous peoples. The shirts are potentially animate; thus, they have powerful potential for strengthening relationships with heritage—and, through this, for strengthening identity in the present.

Making collections accessible to source communities has become a major emphasis in museums, and handling objects a standard methodology for reconnection projects. In North America, the School of American Research in Santa Fe, the Arctic Studies Center at the Smithsonian, the Anchorage Museum, and many other museums have programs in which historic objects are handled by tribal members. The U’Mista Cultural Centre, a tribally run facility in Alaska, cares for masks that are used in potlatches and then returned to the center; the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and the National Museum of the American Indian have similar arrangements. In Britain, the National Museums of Scotland loaned objects to Tłı̄ch̄ communities, which were used in handling sessions (Knowles 2008). There have been many delegations to UK museums for handling/study sessions (see Bolton et al. forthcoming; Herle 2003; Lincoln et al. 2010; Krmpotich and Peers forthcoming). The Blackfoot Shirts Project sits within these contexts.

Today, there are four nations within the Blackfoot Confederacy: Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai, in Alberta, and Blackfeet, in Montana (figure 2). The population of the confederacy is approximately forty-two thousand, divided between those who live on reserves and those who live in cities such as Calgary. In both countries, Blackfoot people have federally recognized treaty status, and their communities—governed by elected councils—receive some federal funding. Education and employment rates in these communities are lower than national averages, but are rising, and key positions in tribal administration, health, and education are now filled by Blackfoot people. Blackfoot language retention is uneven across generations. Many speak it fluently, and there are language classes in all four communities. However, people still feel that Blackfoot language and culture are in danger of being lost, and seek opportunities to strengthen them.

The Blackfoot Shirts Project was initiated by Blackfoot ceremonialists as such an opportunity. In 2004, Kainai ceremonial leaders Frank Weasel Head and Andy Blackwater were invited to

Figure 2. Blackfoot territory and communities today. Map by Jennifer Johnston, University of Aberdeen.



study the shirts at PRM. Following this, Weasel Head stated in a lecture to museum staff that he had never seen such things, that his children and grandchildren had never seen such things—and issued a challenge to “bring them home for a visit” so that Blackfoot people could learn from them. Arts and Humanities Research Council funding for the project was secured in 2009, and Blackfoot mentors titled the project “*Kaahsinnonniksi Aotoksisawooyawa: Our Ancestors Have Come to Visit.*”

“Mrs. Davis, why is our history so sad?”⁴

The Blackfoot shirts at the PRM were collected in 1841 by the governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, Sir George Simpson, and his secretary, Edward Hopkins. They were probably given by Blackfoot leaders at Fort Edmonton as a diplomatic exchange of clothing, part of an established protocol of gift giving within cross-cultural politics across the northern plains. Hopkins took the shirts to Montreal where, as tack marks attest, they were displayed in his home. In 1870, Hopkins retired and moved to England. The PRM acquired the shirts after Hopkins’s death in 1893.

The shirts fit, and do not fit, within standard narratives of the colonial acquisition of cultural objects from indigenous communities. In 1841, when Hopkins and Simpson acquired the shirts, the Blackfoot were a significant political force, robustly defending their territorial boundaries. Simpson, at the time, was the Crown representative. This context, and Blackfoot customs of giving valuable items to affirm significant alliances, makes a diplomatic explanation of the shirts’ transfer likely. Items that left Blackfoot communities after 1850, however, often fit a more coercive pattern of collecting, as Blackfoot people became subject to government control in both Canada and the United States. The near-extinction of the bison, smallpox, treaties, and federal legislation combined to make them legal wards of the state. In the 1880s, the Sun Dance and other religious practices were made illegal through national legislation in both countries (Pettipas 1994: 93–96; Lokensgard 2010: 122). People defied these laws, but the combined changes weakened relationships between Blackfoot people and other-than-human beings at the core of their worldview. Residential schools, designed as engines for assimilation, operated between the 1890s and the 1970s. As well as forbidding the use of traditional languages, residential schools interrupted family relationships. It is this combined disruption of social and spiritual relationships that has created health problems and social dysfunction in Blackfoot communities (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples n.d.).⁵ It was also the result of such colonial processes that led to hairlock shirts and other sacred items leaving Blackfoot communities:

I talked with my friend about why they would give such a sacred item up, for some people it was a matter of survival. Being able to have a meal. And when your children are not eating, you’re going to do whatever it takes to feed them. (Lea Whitford, Blackfeet)

The removal of material culture reinforced the assaults on identity. For Blackfoot people, sacred objects embody collective memory and knowledge: they are anchors for cultural identity. Cultural identity is based on knowing one’s place in the universe and on participating in human and spiritual relationships. Sacred items are used to maintain such relationships through the visiting, gifts, prayers, and exchanges that form the core of Blackfoot ceremonies. The removal of such items was part of the imposition of colonial control over Blackfoot people, and profoundly destabilizing. That most items collected before 1850 were taken to museums in Britain and Europe compounds these effects, because they have been inaccessible to Blackfoot people. Many Blackfoot people have never seen early heritage items: as Treena Tallow (Kainai) said in an interview, “I have never seen quillwork in my life ... I’ve never even seen pictures of quillwork.” Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup and Tim Flohr Sorensen have written (2010: 4) of “the presence of absence” and its effects on people’s lives, and the absence of heritage items has been a profound presence in the lives of Blackfoot people.

Despite the onslaught, Blackfoot culture did not vanish. As Herman Yellow Old Woman (Siksika) noted, “We still speak the language. We still call on our ancestors, where these shirts come from. We might have suffered some loss, but it’s coming back strong.” With great determi-

nation, individuals have preserved ceremonial knowledge and the Blackfoot worldview. Since the 1970s, Blackfoot people have repatriated ceremonial objects from museums and used these to revive ceremonies, engaging in what Archibald (1999: 133) calls “re-remembering”: bringing knowledge back into play, restoring social processes such as the use of Blackfoot names, strengthening cultural identity. Some knowledge, however, is endangered: few people do porcupine quillwork. Blackfoot people want to regain cultural knowledge by learning from their ancestors, often through studying the things they made (Jerry Potts, Piikani, cited in Brown 2000: 191–192). It is in these tensions between the absence of heritage items, their presence in museums, and their needed presence in Blackfoot lives that the return of the shirts and engagements with them can be seen as social healing.

Objects and Healing

‘Healing’ is a concept much discussed regarding indigenous peoples, especially the healing of the social, mental, and physical pathologies caused by colonialism. Healing of Canadian Aboriginal people takes such forms as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an Aboriginal Healing Foundation, financial compensation to residential school survivors, and ‘healing lodges’ and clinical practitioners. However, as James Waldram, a medical anthropologist with the Canadian Aboriginal Healing Foundation, admits (2008: 4), the definition of healing used in relation to Aboriginal communities is “vague and fuzzy.” Neither Aboriginal people nor the non-Aboriginal health professionals who work with them use it in a biomedical sense. It has a broader social meaning, resting on the link between changed social behaviors and improved mental and physical health. As Waldram states, the concept of ‘healing’ is

about the reparation of damaged and disordered social relations. The individual, through outwardly and self-destructive behaviors, has become disconnected from family, friends, community, and even his or her heritage. The reason for undertaking healing is often found in the clients’ desire to make amends and to be accepted back into the web of relationships. (2008: 6)

Heritage plays a key part in this process. Assimilation policies interrupted cultural knowledge and its social transmission: residential schools were all too often successful in teaching students that they must break with the past. As Frank Weasel Head said, “A lot of our young people are trying to identify themselves. They don’t really know who they [are]. All they know is, I’m an Indian, and that’s it. They don’t know their history.” For some, knowledge of specific community and family histories has become another of the absences in these communities.

Having access to heritage objects—making them present—is an important part of the healing process. Material culture has been described as “systems of recall for persons and social groups that have been threatened or traumatized by loss” (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 7; Parkin 1999); as facilitating relationships across generations (Miller and Parrott 2009: 502; Hallam and Hockey 2001); and as symbols of group identity that create “a profound sense of belonging” (Lyons 2002: 116). Reminiscence therapy with museum objects (Arigho 2008; Chatterjee et al. 2009) similarly underscores the potential of handling artifacts to provoke memories and improve well-being. Although Butler (2011: 355) is critical of “heritage healing” as a cure-all for the ills of modernity, access to symbols of collective identity is a powerful tool in the fight for survival for formerly colonized groups. The way that objects serve as a sensory link between the living and the dead facilitates the restoration of relationships—with ancestors, with heritage, and with community members in the present. As Gerald Conaty and Clifford Crane Bear note,

Many of the objects in museum collections played an important role in maintaining connections between human beings and the rest of Creation. Other objects carry with them memories of historical events and the people who experienced those times. . . . *Access to these objects can help rebuild relationships which have been disrupted and restore cultural memories which may be on the brink of being forgotten.* (Conaty and Crane Bear 1998: 73; italics added)

Making heritage objects present within indigenous communities triggers learning about the past, even as it strengthens relationships. These processes are healing.

Handling historic artifacts is an especially powerful form of reconnection: in touching the object, one touches the ancestors who made and used it. The recent ‘sensory turn’ in anthropology (Edwards et al. 2006; Howes 2003; Classen 2005) has explored the provocation of touch, and the way this triggers memory and emotional response: “the sensible, physical characteristics of the thing trigger and thus contribute to the viewer’s sensory perceptions, which in turn trigger emotional and cognitive associations” (Dudley 2009: 7; Tarlow 2012; Sennett 2008). Saunderson (2011: 164), citing experimental psychology, concludes that multisensory encounters enhance memory and learning, making encounters with objects more meaningful.

All of this is especially true for indigenous groups, for whom multisensory, emotional, and spiritual and social perceptions are as important as the visual in learning from objects (Phillips 2002: 62–63). Indigenous researchers often perform the objects’ functions: lifting masks to faces, placing hats on heads, draping robes over elders to acknowledge kinship relations, social structure, clan rights—the objects are reabsorbed into social relationships. Being able to touch, stroke, kiss, hold, dance with, or weep over objects is simultaneously empowering, and a trigger for grief, anger, and joy. ‘Healing’ in these moments has to do with physical presence and the social meanings of touch.

These responses are muted if the encounter is purely visual. The primacy recently accorded to visual modes of engaging with museum objects has prompted Susan Stewart to claim (1999: 28) that museums are a set of “ritualized practice[s] of refraining from touch.” Such is the expectation that visitors will look but not touch that, as Classen and Howes (2006: 216) note, “the issue of tactile access to collections is usually only raised as regards the visually impaired, the assumption being that those who can see have no need to touch” (see also Chatterjee 2008: 2; Saunderson 2011: 159–160). The emphasis on visual interaction with museum objects is a culturally, professionally, and historically informed set of values and ideals (Candlin 2008). For indigenous peoples, museum control over the nature of engagements with objects removed from their communities has been part of the colonial experience. Recently, museums have extended the ‘right’ to handle ‘real’ objects (as opposed to duplicates in educational handling collections) to indigenous researchers, as a mechanism for cultural learning as well as an acknowledgment of shifting relations of power.

On a more pragmatic basis, PRM staff were initially concerned about handling of the shirts because of the risks of physical damage and the widespread contamination of museum collections through historic pesticide use. Fortunately, XRF spectrometry testing revealed that PRM collections have only trace levels of arsenic and mercury, making handling feasible for this project if people either wore gloves or washed their hands after handling.⁶ To balance the need for physical care of the shirts with the need of Blackfoot people for direct contact with them, Heather Richardson, head of conservation at PRM, traveled to Alberta to facilitate handling sessions.

The Ancestors Come Home

In spring 2010, the shirts were shipped to Alberta, where the team held forty-seven sessions with over five hundred Blackfoot people. Sessions were prebooked with elders, ceremonialists,

artists and craftspeople, teachers, and high school and college students from each of the four communities. At the request of elders, the project team also invited a group of Blackfoot people in a substance abuse rehabilitation program, in the hope that the experience would be a catalyst for healing for them.

In considering how engagements with the shirts were healing for Blackfoot people, it is important to understand the political dynamics within which these events occurred. While literature on museum collaborations has emphasized Clifford's (1997) idea of the 'contact zone', recent nuancing of this concept suggests that museums remain 'invited spaces' in which power remains with the museum (Lynch and Alberti 2010; Lynch 2011; Boast 2011). Looking carefully at local micropolitics, however, is key. At Glenbow, staff have developed long-term relations with Blackfoot people, who act as museum advisors. Glenbow staff helped to create the Alberta Repatriation Act, and work for Blackfoot communities on heritage issues (Conaty 2008). Galt staff have been mentored by Glenbow staff as well as directly by Blackfoot people. There was no simple insider/outsider dynamic in the sessions—some Blackfoot are regular consultants for these museums, while others assert forms of moral ownership over collections in these spaces. The project was initiated by Blackfoot ceremonialists to benefit Blackfoot people, who appropriated backroom spaces in which sessions occurred (the conservation lab at Glenbow; the archives room at Galt) for their own purposes. They also imposed Blackfoot perspectives and expectations on these spaces, taking ownership of them in key ways.

Rather than as controlled spaces, one might see these sessions as involving overlapping relationships: among Blackfoot people and ancestors, between the UK project team and Glenbow/Galt museum staff, between museum/project staff and Blackfoot people. Each session began with Blackfoot protocol for interacting with sacred beings: with prayer and smudging. The ancestors' presence was acknowledged and their assistance was invoked, along with that of other beings. Blackfoot language, ontology, and the smell of sweetgrass framed the encounter, turning the space partially into a Blackfoot one.⁷ Project team members then discussed the provenance of the shirts, engaging with Blackfoot concerns about whose shirts these might have been (and Blackfoot relationships with ancestors), and briefed participants on handling techniques, showing on a replica shirt where the hide could safely be touched. We also acknowledged our relationships with Blackfoot ceremonialists, whose support enabled the project by encouraging community participation, and noted their advice that according to cultural protocol, the hairlock shirts should not be touched by menstruating women. Having addressed these various relationships, we uncovered the first shirt.

Sessions began with an undecorated work garment (PRM 1893.67.5) that is poorly tanned, water damaged, and work-soiled. People gently stroked the shirt, sometimes leaning over and sniffing for the scent of home-tanned hide. We encouraged people to examine the stitching, construction, and signs of wear on the shirt, and to think about the gender roles involved in its making and use.

Following this, one of the decorated shirts (PRM 1893.67.1, 2, 3, 4) was uncovered. These are visually arresting, and uncovering them was always accompanied by exclamations. People paused to take in the power of the shirt and its associated spirits. The room filled with emotion: awe, joy at seeing the shirts, grief and anger at all that has been taken away from Blackfoot people, gratitude that the shirts were able to visit. Some wept, in pride and in sorrow; some sang honor songs or spoke to the ancestors. People looked intently at the shirts, counting painted lines, using magnifying glasses, taking photographs. Some felt for spiritual energies by holding their hands over the shirts. Many people touched them gently: traced painted lines with fingers, touched quillwork and sinew stitching to feel its texture, and stroked the hide. One shirt is painted with the artist's finger marks, and people put their fingers on these, touching the artist's hand through the paint.⁸ In every workshop, participants wanted their pictures taken with

the ancestors in the manner of family photographs: these engagements were ways of renewing relationships.

This was a highly emotional part of the session. Fowles (2010: 26) has noted that “absences perform labor, frequently intensifying our emotional or cognitive engagement with that which is manifestly not present,” and the uncovering of the powerful *presence* of the ancestors/shirts made manifest that which had been absent, provoking intense emotional responses. Ramona Big Head, who brought a group of students to see the shirts, remembers that “when the shirts were uncovered and we saw them for the first time, there was a breathless silence that overcame us. We were simply in awe. It was almost as though we could feel the presence of our ancestors who made those shirts.” Touching the shirts, and the emotional responses that their presence generated, involved, as Eelco Runia (2006: 5) has expressed it, “being in touch—either literally or figuratively—with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are.”

As with other projects exploring relations between material culture, touch, and emotion (Edwards 2006, 2010; Harris and Sorensen 2010; Seremetakis 1994), engaging with the shirts was also a social process. Caressing, weeping, singing honor songs, and expressing grief and anger are not responses to asocial, inanimate objects: these are things one does in the context of social relationships. Multisensory ‘visits’ are part of Blackfoot sociality and the means of maintaining relationships with the landscape, other-than-human beings, and ancestors. Relationships being renewed were not simply with heritage, however, but with the work that history does in the present. While encountering the past, Blackfoot people in these sessions were ‘getting in touch with’ identity in the present.

Presence, Absence, History, Identity

The shirts are from a distant, pretreaty past for Blackfoot people, and sensory engagements with them brought that past into the room. These historic object-persons were also clothing, an evocative “surface where collective norms, values and codes are deposited” (Seremetakis 1994: 133). As Darnell Rides at the Door, an educator and ceremonialist, said, “When I went and had the opportunity to see them at the museum, it was like holding a piece of my grandmother’s teachings in my hands.”

Within each session, initial observations about hide, stitching, dyes, quillwork, and decorative designs led to discussions about the people who made them, what they knew, and how they and their descendants had survived. If participants’ embodied interactions with the shirts evoked social relationships with ancestors, these relationships were expressed as Blackfoot histories, either personal, family, or community—and these histories expressed an oppositional stance to mainstream society experiences of the past, thus affirming a distinct Blackfoot identity.

Historical relationships discussed ranged from the time of Morning Star and Mistaken Morning Star, ancestral beings whose images are quilled into one of the shirts’ decorations, to recent family histories of participants. People invoked remembered ancestors painted by artists Karl Bodmer and George Catlin wearing similar shirts in the 1830s. Some mentioned ancestors who lived through events such as the Baker Massacre of 1870, while others recalled more recent kin, especially grandmothers who tanned hide in defiance of assimilation policies. That relationships between participants and ancestors were often mentioned is very much part of Blackfoot culture, in which history is often biographically narrated (Brown et al. 2006: 149–150). And, as Narcisse Blood, Kainai educator and ceremonialist, has said, “For us, relationship is our life—the relationship to the land, ... to the cosmos, you know, the family relationship. Everything is about relationship” (quoted in Lokensgard 2010: 81).

Much of this discourse was about the shirts' function as material witnesses to Blackfoot experiences of history, which have been very different from dominant society narratives of the past.⁹ In discussing why the project was important to Blackfoot people, Narcisse Blood said that "these shirts are about *our* history, written by us." Elders enjoyed explaining Blackfoot history to student groups. One high school teacher wore a replica shirt project staff had commissioned, and stood in front of the historic shirts telling students about the sacred history they embodied—and about the history of repatriation in the community, through which items had been brought home for ceremonial use. References to Blackfoot histories functioned as touchstones to evoke core values; as reminders of the strength of ancestors across difficult times; and as articulations of the oppositional nature of Blackfoot experiences of history (political and social marginalization) to mainstream narratives of progress—and thus of the oppositional nature of Blackfoot identity today. Blackfeet College student Debbie Gobert articulated this function of historical discourse when asked what she would do with the shirts:

I would like to put them out on display for the world to see, not just the Blackfeet people. And I would want other people to know our history, that we just aren't here being drunks, that we did have meanings, and that our ways, as Blackfeet people, can actually be noticed, not just forgotten.

Debbie's response emphasizes the fact that many of the memories provoked by the presence of the shirts were difficult. Anger, grief, and frustration were as much a part of these narratives as admiration and reverence for ancestors. Articulating these emotions is part of the process of "being in touch ... with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are" (Runia 2006: 5). Finding a place for emotion in narratives about the past is part of the healing process for indigenous peoples, whose experiences have been suppressed by mainstream narratives. Strong emotion also heightened the sense of opposition to mainstream narratives and strengthened the sense of a distinct Blackfoot identity in the present.

The Past in the Present

In 1992, Jonathan Hill wrote that in order to resist marginalization, "the first necessity of disempowered peoples, ... is that of poetically constructing a shared understanding of the historical past" (Hill 1992: 811). Hill's comments resonate with Homi Bhabha's statement that history "is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity." Bhabha acknowledged that this process is sometimes "a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (cited in Gandhi 1998: 7). What Blackfoot people were doing with the shirts was re-membering: affirming shared understandings of the past, across the unevenness of knowledge within Blackfoot communities that colonialism has created. Diane Hafner noted similarly (2010: 269) that Lamalama Aboriginal people in an Australian research project, "read the objects discursively as a narrative about identity and history. They aim to make sense of the past and have it fulfil the needs of the present." Such uses of the past are universal, but have an especially powerful role within formerly colonized societies. Rosenzweig and Thelen's large-scale survey of American uses of the past (including Dakota Sioux respondents) found that people "interpreted and revised what experiences meant to them in order to create and pass on legacies of their own choosing" (1998: 39), actively using shared knowledge about the past to build community in the present.

Historic artifacts emerge in this context as technologies of collective memory and identity. Frank Weasel Head describes the shirts as codices of knowledge that can be unpacked to under-

stand identity: “These shirts are our curriculum; that’s how we know who we are.” With these meanings latent within museum objects, handling sessions can trigger “a resurgence of cultural pride and a reassessment of contemporary identity” (Hafner 2010: 272). For Blackfoot participants, this was not simply a sensory process, but a social one. It involved interaction with coparticipants and with ancestors: it involved the restoration of social relationships with the past, made present in the forms of the shirts after their long absence. The shirts/ancestors themselves became crucial links within social relationships among Blackfoot people, bringing them together, teaching them, strengthening identity: healing.

‘Ceremonies of Renewal’

To understand the culturally specific perspectives that made the handling sessions efficacious, the Blackfoot concept of ‘ceremonies of renewal’ is useful. Cynthia Chambers and Narcisse Blood use this phrase (2009: 267) in the context of repatriating, or restoring, relationships with traditional Blackfoot lands:

Repatriation, as an idea and a practice, acknowledges that like any reciprocal, interdependent relationship, the one between people and the places [or objects] which sustain them must be nurtured through unimpeded access, continued exchange of knowledge, and ceremonies of renewal such as visiting and exchanging of gifts and stories.

Within Blackfoot culture, such visits are occasions on which sacred knowledge—which underpins identity for traditionally oriented Blackfoot people—is transferred, and renewed, across generations. This process echoes Blackfoot ceremonial practices such as the ritual opening of sacred bundles, occasions on which knowledge and relationships are renewed between humans present in the ritual space and other-than-human beings associated with the bundles (Zedeño 2008; Lokensgard 2010). Blackfoot people who attend ceremonies are accustomed to using material items as mnemonics for collective history and identity, and as the focus for the renewal of relationships within Blackfoot society and between Blackfoot people and spiritual beings. Through such occasions of renewal, blessings are given to the people involved, including health, strength, and well-being. If things are understood in Blackfoot ontology as potentially animate, renewing relationships is the process by which they become so.

Across the project, this process of renewal was facilitated by visits with the shirts/ancestors: as Treena Tallow (Kainai) observed, “They’re creating conversations just with their presence.” These visits created shared experiences and triggered the transmission of knowledge, strengthening relationships among community members. This was seen very strongly within the Kainai community, where high school teachers initiated a project “to welcome our ancestors home,” teaching students hide tanning and quillwork. At the same time, ceremonialists were considering how to revive a long-dormant ceremony to transfer the rights to own hairlock shirts. These projects raised many questions: about what was appropriate to teach students (quillwork is a sacred, initiated art), about how the ceremony should be conducted, about who had the knowledge necessary for such decisions. Ramona Big Head said that these dialogues

became a kind of opening up of all these questions. The answers were already there and already within us. We just hadn’t asked those questions yet. We hadn’t had the voice to really articulate what we needed to know. . . . The way I see it, the knowledge was always there. But no one really opened that box, because we hadn’t had the opportunity to think about it. And bringing the shirts here, all of a sudden these questions started coming up and we were being

led to people who knew what they were talking about. ... And it's like we opened up a box of knowledge that we didn't realise we had.

These conversations link to Chambers and Blood's concept: they were "ceremonies of renewal such as visiting and exchanging of gifts and stories" (2009: 267).

Bringing the Past Into the Future: Implications for Blackfoot Communities

While discussions sparked by the visits with the shirts are still ongoing within Blackfoot communities, two sets of outcomes can already be seen. One involved high school and college students, and one involved ceremonial activity.

For many students, the effects of visiting with the shirts/ancestors were profound. One of the high school students who learned to do hide tanning and visited the shirts wrote that these projects affected his life "beyond any media influences. It was like a window into my original self. It showed me who I originated from. This program made me fill in that empty part of myself ... These teachings are not outdated, they are skills that help my people be who they truly are."¹⁰ Others began to think about heritage as a part of their futures. One college student changed his major, the day after his visit, to Blackfeet studies, and is now in a curatorial training program. Another, Alison Frank-Tailfeathers, reflected, "It was a life-changing event ... We were here all of maybe an hour with them. And that made me want to further my education, and to research First Nations archives and maybe—you never know—I may someday be the head of a First Nations museum!"

The visit of the shirts sparked another set of outcomes when Kainai ceremonialists decided to revive a ceremony to transfer the rights to own hairlock shirts. This ceremony had become dormant as the result of assimilation pressures. They asked the project team if one of the historic shirts could be present in the ceremony so that the ancestors could act as a bridge from past to present to sanction this renewal. Conservator Heather Richardson folded one of the shirts into a laptop-sized bundle, and we took it into the museum boardroom for the ceremony. The shirt was passed reverently from the officiant to each of the men receiving the rights: there was a sense of awe that the ancestors themselves were present. It was a joyous occasion—something precious had been brought back, and that bringing back was a re-membering for those present. This was a kind of healing from the past, using the past to achieve it.

Although the shirts are now back in Oxford, they have a continued presence in Blackfoot communities. People use the project website, and Blackfoot teachers have contributed lesson plans to it; framed photographs of the shirts were given to college graduates; posters are up on classroom walls. Blackfoot people have made it clear that they have fulfilled their initial goals in respect to the project. They have also made it clear, through a formal request for another loan, that, as they said, "the work of the shirts is not finished in our communities."

Outcomes and Implications: Museums

If the 'work' of the shirts is healing, and if particular forms of presence of heritage objects provoke healing, then this project has serious implications for museums. One of these involves the obligation to provide culturally appropriate forms of access to heritage items, and the other involves the nature of relationships renewed between museums and indigenous communities through these projects.

While some North American museums have permitted use of historic objects in ceremonies, for UK museums, such approaches are radical. The decision to use a fragile, historic shirt in a ceremony was made by the director of the PRM, Michael O'Hanlon, in discussion with the museum's head of conservation, Heather Richardson, and the curator for the Americas collections, Laura Peers. The decision weighed the potential risk of transfer of ceremonial body paint onto the shirt during the ceremony against the potential positive effects of the ceremony on the Kainai community. The team decided to take every precaution to safeguard the shirt, but not to use the word 'damage' should paint transfer occur: such changes would be understood as part of the continuing biography of the shirt. In the end, no physical alterations occurred to the shirt in the ceremony.

If this was a ceremony of renewal for Blackfoot people, it has the potential to be so for museums as well. There was a powerful exchange of knowledge in this event about the potential meanings of objects and about how museums might conceive of objects. As Jean Davis said of the shirts, "They're artefacts in a museum, but when they come back into our community they are part of a family; someone's taking care of them, someone is treating them with a lot of love, respect." People commented that the project would not have had such powerful effects had we been looking at photographs of the shirts, or if the shirts had been in glass cases—which is how museums most frequently provide 'access' to collections. Davis responded to this issue by saying, "There's nothing better than actually having that person right beside you to hug them, instead of just looking at a picture." Museums need to acknowledge that some audiences require sensory and emotional engagements with objects. This needs to happen at the policy level and to be reflected in the very definition of museums.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) (2007) definition says that museums "acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment." The Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (2004: 4) states that "[o]ver time, objects ... have become part of ... the heritage of the nations which house them." Neither statement acknowledges the implications of the lack of direct access to heritage items for indigenous peoples. As Classen and Howes (2006: 209) remind us, "Collecting is a form of conquest and collected artifacts are material signs of victory over their former owners." So is the nature of access to collected heritage items for indigenous groups. While Besterman's conclusion (2011: 240) that museums need to enter into debates about "trans-cultural accountability" is beginning to be reflected in literature on museum ethics (Marstine 2011; Janes and Conaty 2005), it is seldom discussed at the level of policy.

This project was a loan, after which the shirts were returned to Oxford. If making material heritage accessible is significant for healing within indigenous communities, and if this process depends on "unimpeded access" (Chambers and Blood 2009: 267), then one might see the project as a failure, and as proof that museums often pretend to engage in collaborations with source communities while retaining control over objects and power (Lynch and Alberti 2010). Perhaps we might assume that as so often happens, museum staff and indigenous participants developed only transient relationships across this project, and neither understood nor respected each other's goals (Tuhivai Smith 1999: 28, 35).

This would, however, be imposing theory in a way that masks a more complex reality. Museums and indigenous people may choose to work with each other with eyes wide open, knowing that there are different goals involved on each side (are there 'sides?'), knowing the limitations of authority offered, and understanding the dynamics of power involved in such work. This is potentially the basis for a genuine relationship: realistic rather than idealistic, with a commit-

ment to achieving multiple goals for all participants, and understanding that not all goals will be achievable.

Blackfoot people engaged with this project in order to pursue their own goals, knowing that it involved a loan of the shirts. Their goals were not simply about having continued access to the shirts, but about renewing relationships—with heritage, within the community, and between the community and the various museums involved. This goal of renewing relationships, which is ultimately healing for indigenous people, has deep implications for museums.

Diane Hafner (2010: 257) writes of “relationships of materiality” between museums and source communities, based around mutual interests in objects. Blackfoot people have maintained a regular presence in the Pitt Rivers Museum now for a decade, and have taught many staff across museum departments, some of whom have now left to work at other institutions. They have profoundly influenced the museum’s procedures in terms of care of collections and commitment to making collections accessible for indigenous communities. Every time museum staff work with the shirts, we reengage with what Blackfoot people have taught us about them, and we continue to consult with Blackfoot mentors: there are many forms of ongoing visits to maintain our relationships. Most importantly, we find that such moments of reconnection serve as a reminder that people within relationships have ongoing obligations to each other: this project did not discharge such responsibilities, but strengthened them. This is, indeed, a transformation, and renewal, of relationships, and likely to lead to other ‘ceremonies of renewal’ for indigenous peoples.

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■ NOTES

1. Laura Peers, curator (Americas), PRM; Heather Richardson, head of conservation, PRM; Alison Brown, Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen. There was also a project facilitation team that included staff at PRM, Glenbow, Galt, and mentors from all four Blackfoot nations. The author would like to thank everyone involved for making the Blackfoot Shirts Project possible, and also to thank anonymous readers who commented on earlier drafts of this article. Research underpinning this article was funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. Information about research materials related to this project may be obtained from the author at: laura.peers@prm.ox.ac.uk
2. I use ‘Blackfoot’ in this article as shorthand for ‘Blackfoot and Blackfeet’. All unreferenced quotes are taken from interviews with handling session participants in 2010–2011.
3. I am grateful to Duane Mistaken Chief (personal communication, 2012), Red Crow Community College, for his linguistic and cultural explication of animacy in regard to the shirts.
4. Student to Jean Davis (Piikani), teacher, Piikani Nation High School.
5. On the psychopathology of Native American groups as the result of colonial processes, see Duran et al. (1998) and Whitbeck et al. (2004).
6. Conservation assessments in the planning phase concluded that the benefit to the shirts of protection from skin oil did not outweigh the benefit to Blackfoot people from ungloved touching. Few participants chose to wear gloves. Postworkshop assessments showed minor levels of wear on the shirts, but no obvious deposits from handling.
7. Similarly, Phillips (2003: 156) writes of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia becoming a Northwest Coast longhouse during an opening ceremony.

8. See Classen and Howes (2006: 202): “By touching a collected object the hand of the visitor also encounters the traces of the hand of the object’s creator.”
9. See also Hafner’s (2010: 269) experience with Australian Aboriginal people: “Such contexts [of ‘reading’ objects] include the sweep of their historical experience, forced removal.”
10. I am grateful to Delia Cross Child for collecting responses from student participants.

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