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FIGURATIVE REPATRIATION

First Nations 'Artist-Warriors' Recover, Reclaim, and Return Cultural Property through Self-Definition

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Abstract

This article begins with an analysis of the problems of 'physical repatriation', as I review the case of the return of a First Nations mask to its community of origin. First Nations struggle to fit their concepts of ownership into western ones, where objects are viewed as alienable. As an alternative, the art of John Powell and Marianne Nicolson depicts a 'figurative repatriation' that does not rely on either the courts or museums to recognize legal or moral ownership. I argue that these contemporary artworks are social agents, which bring First Nations cultural objects home by staking out territory within museums. These 'artist warriors' forcibly recover (both literally and metaphorically) First Nations objects on display in foreign settings and reinscribe meaning at the level of the personal and the communal. They make objectified assertions of native identity that reclaim the right to self-definition. Moreover, these claims are made all the more powerful through their conscious location within an oppositional discourse framed by the Canadian western art world.

Key Words ◆ First Nations ◆ Northwest Coast ◆ ownership ◆ reception ◆ repatriation ◆ self-definition ◆ social agency

In the past decade in Canada, hundreds of First Nations objects have been physically repatriated to their source communities for a multitude of reasons. One motivation for this act is to attempt to mitigate the negative effects of colonialism, salvage anthropology and museum object collecting by returning native cultural objects to their original owners. Another motivation is the belief that with the physical return of

meaningful, cultural objects there will come a renaissance in learning about native beliefs and knowledge and a concomitant restoration of indigenous pride. A more latent motivation is the belief that a re-establishment of control over self-representation will result in proof of the ability to be a sovereign nation enacting self-governance. I begin by arguing that although physical repatriation of cultural objects has been perceived as a possible panacea for the many ills of native/non-native historical relations, we are learning that objects 'sent home' do not end the trickiness of ownership or control issues. I illustrate this with examples from the First Nations of the Northwest Coast.

The late Mohawk curator Deborah Doxtator spoke on issues related to repatriation and the social agency of objects. It is worthwhile quoting her at length:

Aboriginal peoples in Canada over the past decade have experienced an increasing need to understand and, once again, to own our cultural past, present and future. I've been thinking a lot about the verb 'to own'. It boils down to a notion of owning as property, but that's not really all the word means. It's certainly not what I mean. I'm talking about owning who we are.

When people talk about repatriation, they seem to talk about it in terms of native people backing up the trucks, taking everything out of the museums and putting it all behind a little fence with a sign that says: 'This is mine. You can't look at it. You can't see it'. That's what some museums have done to them, I guess.

I don't mean ownership in that way - not as property you keep from other people, in that way of owning, because you can own things that way and still own nothing. What I mean is that you own the responsibility of who you are and what you belong to . . . You have to own who you are because if you don't take the responsibility, somebody else will, and, when that happens, you end up having to live within the confines of what other people think your life should be. (Doxtator, 1996: 56-7)

Doxtator indicates that there are problems with what I will term the 'physical repatriation' of objects, or, when objects actually return to their place of origin.

In the United States of America, repatriation of indigenous cultural objects is legislated by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), Public Law 101-601, created in 1990. In Canada, the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations worked together to create a document outlining ethical guidelines for both native access to museum collections and repatriation of native human remains and cultural objects. However, unlike the established repatriation law in the United States, this 1992 Task Force Report, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples in Canada* (Hill and Nicks, 1992), was intended to be morally persuasive, rather than legally binding.

Doxtator notes that while the Task Force Report calls for equal partnerships and co-management between non-native museums and native people, native people are only passive participants since the responsibility and power remain with museums. Neither co-ownership nor a native view of cultural property as inalienable are recognized in the Task Force document (Doxtator, 1996: 63). Haida lawyer *gii-dahl-guud-sliiaay* (also known as Terri-Lynn Williams) concurs, highlighting

the distinction made between existing legal rights and moral obligations in the Task Force Report. This distinction effectively preserves the presumption that First Nations lack title to cultural property and fails to reconcile the property concepts of First Nations with Western systems of laws. Until this reconciliation is done, new partnerships between museums and First Nations will not adequately address the questions raised by repatriation, since the basis of repatriation will remain firmly in the Western world view. (*gii-dahl-guud-sliiaay*, 1995: 198–9)

Both *gii-dahl-guud-sliiaay* and Doxtator point out that a significant problem with physical repatriation involves proving ownership of cultural property. By whose definitions will this be determined? The Canadian legal system and aboriginal traditional laws are often not in agreement over what constitutes ownership or proof of ownership. Doxtator suggests that one of the main problems with physical repatriation is the fact that the process occurs under the rubric of western conceptions of ownership, framed within the Canadian legal system and British common law where objects are viewed as alienable property and thus can be relocated.

Repatriation means to restore or return to one's native land or place of origin. This implies that in repatriation a material object physically moves from foreign land to native land from whence it had been taken – in the hope of a complete restoration. However, as Doxtator's argument conveys, this literal return to a literal community may not adequately encompass a First Nations understanding of having responsibility towards an expression of self-identity. Because these objects come with complex histories, rights and protocols, viewing them as mobile property does not fulfill their potential as repositories of self-determination.

I believe the desire that motivates repatriation is the desire to obtain the right to self-define who one is as an individual and as a First Nation. Therefore, I would like to suggest that one could more fruitfully view repatriation as the act of claiming metaphorical territory via control of an object. This is done by First Nations setting the terminology with which one discusses their cultural objects, thus compelling the use of an aboriginal conceptual system. Although ostensibly repatriation is about the return of an object to a specific place, it is also about being linked to an object and making a challenging statement about who is in control.

The second half of this article offers an alternative to physical repatriation, which I label 'figurative repatriation'. I assert that contemporary native artists may use their artwork to make claims of self-determination, but this argument cannot be accomplished from within native territory. Figurative repatriation requires non-native audiences so that messages of native control and ownership can be heard, seen and witnessed by non-native people. In this way, these artworks, existing in interactive spaces, are sites of action for the creation of empowering social relations.

This article originates from the theoretical position that material cultural expressions (sometimes termed 'art objects' by museum curators and scholars) are more than just reflections of existing states of being, they actually *do* things. Contested material culture, such as that under repatriation claims, can act as social agents (Gell, 1998), in as much as collected or alienated objects are intrinsically linked in native eyes to their ancestral forebears. Art serves as a material representation of an artist's and/or a First Nation's identity and cultural beliefs and for this reason is often rhetorically energetic (Thomas, 1995: 98). First Nations art is a message to be received, comprehended, misunderstood or rejected by an audience. As First Nations artists consciously choose to display their material cultural expressions in western museums, museum professionals, university scholars and First Nations must, in James Clifford's words, 'grapple with the real difficulties of dialogue, alliance, inequality, and translation' (1997: 213). In these 'relations of reception' (Townsend-Gault, 1997) between native and non-native people, control over ownership, self-representation and future identities are negotiated.

THE CASE OF THE NUXALK ECHO MASK'S PHYSICAL REPATRIATION

In order to situate Doxtator's critique within a specific example of 'physical repatriation', I would like to share my research on the repatriation of a specific Nuxalk Echo mask (Kramer, 2003). This case-study is drawn from my fieldwork in Bella Coola, British Columbia, home of the Nuxalk Nation.

In August of 1995, during my initial field visit to Bella Coola, I attended a wedding anniversary feast in the Nuxalk hall. First we ate, then there were speeches, and finally there were what was termed by the Nuxalk 'Indian dances'. This was my first encounter with Echo. Echo is a supernatural creature known by the Nuxalk from when they first descended to the Bella Coola Valley from above, thousands of years ago. It is said that Echo (or *sats'alan* in Nuxalk) was very clever at learning languages and so acted as herald to call people to dances. He often imitated the voices around him and possessed a proud and aristocratic



FIGURE 1 Captain Schooner wearing Echo mask. *Courtesy Canadian Museum of Civilization. Photograph: Harlan Ingersoll Smith, negative no. 57762*

(Tepper, 1991: 139–41) (Figure 1). The mask, which is believed to be over 140 years old, was passed down through the generations, gaining an incredibly complicated genealogy both in the minds of the Nuxalk who remember and the scholars who photographed and recorded its existence.

There is much contention in Bella Coola over who owns this Echo mask. As one Nuxalk man told me:

Too many people owned it. The people owned it . . . Everybody wanted it, like it was everybody's mask, so many families. Even today I don't know who it belongs to. It was always in dispute as long as I can remember. It is family-owned, but a big family.

I was told by various members of different Nuxalk families how they could claim or had claimed ownership of this mask. There are two connected explanations for this confusion. First, the Nuxalk, like many First Nations in British Columbia, had experienced population decimation from diseases brought by European and North American explorers and settlers. The Nuxalk were affected the most by the 1862–1863 smallpox epidemic. Families were so reduced that many inter-family

disposition (McIlwraith, 1992 vol I: 46, 306, vol II: 274). The Nuxalk represent Echo with a masked dancer, who performs a specific choreography of mouth changes, while a song about Echo's activities is sung in Nuxalk (*Coast Mountain News*, 1990: 15; Sandoval, 1997: 9). The mask I saw danced was painted bright green with circular bulging eyes, swirly eyebrows, and a shock of hair on top. Bright red mouths were inserted representing different facial expressions.

I witnessed this performance only once, because two months later, in October of 1995, a Nuxalk elder of Bella Coola sold the mask to a non-native art dealer from Victoria for 35,000 Canadian dollars. This particular mask had been photographed in 1924 by anthropologist Harlan Smith

adoptions occurred causing havoc with the traditional inheritance of chiefly status and secret society membership, thus creating a tangle of crests. The second explanation for this confusion, which partially stems from the first, is that it is not remembered whether this particular Echo mask is a secret society (*kusiut*) or chiefly (*sisook*) privilege, causing much uncertainty about how exactly this mask would have been owned before the epidemic.

Traditional Nuxalk society was governed by two parallel social organizations: the *kusiut* society and the *sisook* society. Under Nuxalk traditional law, the right to display the Echo mask was both a *kusiut* privilege and a *sisook* privilege. In the *kusiut* society, members owned the right to use the masked dance to represent their personal supernatural power figures. Echo was one of the figures in this type of dance. *Kusiut* privileges were handed down from individual to individual and became the exclusive property of the most recent initiate (McIlwraith, 1992 vol II: 27). For this reason, ownership of the Echo mask can be considered an *individual* privilege.

However, one could also make the case that ownership of the Echo mask is a *family* owned privilege. Under Nuxalk traditional law, the Echo mask is also a *sisook* or chiefly prerogative (Boas, 1898: 93; Kolstee, 1982: 166; McIlwraith, 1992 vol I: 306, 323, 341, vol II: 274–5). It was said that Echo introduced himself to certain ancestral families when they came down from above, and landed in the Bella Coola Valley. These families claimed possession of the specific land upon which they settled and claimed possession of the right to display Echo at certain ceremonial events as their crest figure. The family collectively owned the origin story about meeting Echo. The Echo mask would then be a material representation of this story and could be danced by members of the family if given permission to do so by family consensus. The mask was held in trust by the eldest male member of the family, or chief, who would inherit custodial rights in the name of his entire family.

There has been no resolution about whether the actual mask owned by the elder was originally a *kusiut* society or *sisook* society privilege. In any case, the Nuxalk elder who sold the Echo mask probably did so to get rid of the source of contention that was causing such inter-family squabbling. It is curious that the selling of the physical mask seemed to have stopped the dance's performance in Bella Coola for a number of years. As the art dealer told me, he bought the physical mask, not the rights to perform the Echo masked dance. Technically, another Echo mask could have been carved and then the dance performed. In fact, the art dealer claims he made a copy of the mask for the elder. I have no knowledge of whether this actually happened, although I do know there exists at least one, and maybe two recently carved Echo masks in the Bella Coola Valley. Perhaps the contentions in Bella Coola over ownership made

the public performance of the Echo dance an impossibility, since it would cause too much dissent. But the problem of ownership did not end with the elder's act, it merely transferred the problem out of the valley into a larger international arena, pointing to the way that objects move into and out of various regimes of value (Myers, 2001).

The art dealer who bought the Echo mask stripped off the green paint to reveal a much older blue paint beneath; a cobalt blue called 'Nuxalk blue', considered representative of the traditional Nuxalk art style (Holm, 1965: 26). The art dealer found a buyer in Chicago who was willing to pay approximately 250,000 United States dollars for the mask, but his plans to sell it were squelched when the Canadian government, citing Canada's *Cultural Property Export and Import Act* (Canadian Statutes Chapter C-51), refused to grant an export permit for such an important piece of Canadian heritage. The Act (established in 1977) legislates what 'Canadian cultural property' is and thus serves as a barrier against the loss of Canadian cultural property by trying to prevent sales outside Canada (Walden, 1995). Specifically, under this act the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board has jurisdiction to delay granting export permits to any object:

- of outstanding significance by reason of its close association with Canadian history or national life, its aesthetic qualities, or its value in the study of the arts or sciences; and
- is of such a degree of national importance that its loss to Canada would significantly diminish the national heritage. (Walden, 1995: 205)

An expert examiner, chosen by the government, determines whether or not an object falls under this category. If it does, then the delay period is to be used to alert Canadian institutions, mostly museums and cultural centers, to arrange a sale internally to keep the cultural property from leaving the country. The federal Department of Heritage has an annual budget to provide matching funds to Canadian institutions that want to purchase those objects determined to be cultural property.

In the case of the Echo mask, the expert examiner determined the mask was 'rare', had 'associated documentation' and that 'its export from Canada would result in an irreplaceable loss to the moveable cultural heritage' (Alan Hoover, pers. com. 1998). Therefore, in January 1996 he recommended against issuing an export permit. Subsequently, a six-month delay period was granted to allow the Cultural Property Export Review Board to identify a Canadian institution that would purchase the mask.

Up to this point no one in Bella Coola knew about the sale of the Echo mask because it had been sold in secret. The chair of the Archaeology department at Simon Fraser University alerted the Nuxalk band

council that the mask had been sold out of the valley (Phil Hobler, pers. com. 1998). He knew this because the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Simon Fraser University had been offered the chance to buy the Echo mask. Once the Nuxalk found out about the mask's sale, they mobilized to ensure its return to the valley. The actions of the Canadian government had given the Nuxalk Nation a few months to make a bid to win institutional status for their cultural center and offered them the chance to buy back the mask with federally funded money from the Department of Heritage.

Because the delay period was quickly running out, the Nuxalk band council decided to sue the art dealer. They claimed that under traditional Nuxalk law the elder who sold the mask should only be considered the mask's custodian rather than its owner, and therefore she had no right to sell it. They took the dealer to civil court and the case was heard in the British Columbia Supreme Court. The court imposed a longer interim waiting period, placing the mask in the custody of the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria until a resolution could be worked out between the Nuxalk Nation and the art dealer. Although the case was eventually settled out of court, it may have given the Nuxalk Nation leverage against the dealer. The use of the court injunction to stave off the immediate sale of the mask outside Canada was publicized in newspaper articles from Victoria to Toronto and carried sufficient negative publicity to convince the dealer that the mask should be sold within Canada to Nuxalk buyers (Canadian Press Release, 1996a, 1996b; McDowell, 1996; Todd, 1996). Although the dealer continued to proclaim his legal right to buy the mask, in the out-of-court settlement, he agreed to allow the Nuxalk Nation to buy it back. The mask was purchased for 200,000 Canadian dollars. Most of the funds were provided by the Canadian Department of Heritage, with a portion donated by the art dealer himself. The mask thus became the property of the Nuxalk Nation as a whole in December 1997. The elder who had sold it was no longer involved in the mask's care.

The Nuxalk Nation publicly welcomed the mask's return. It now resides in a display case in the foyer of the local Bella Coola bank, taking the place of an automated banking machine (Kuhn, 1997) (Figure 2). The label beneath the mask reads:

The Echo mask belongs to the Nuxalk people. The Echo mask is a ceremonial mask which was carved in 1860 by a Nuxalk master carver. The mask is carved from alder, it has 6 interchangeable mouth pieces and has its original horse hair attached to the forehead. The Echo mask dance was performed as recently as 1995 at a winter ceremony.

The Nuxalk Nation were successful in preventing this sacred mask from being sold to a Chicago art collector. The Echo mask was repatriated to the Nuxalk people in November [sic], 1997.



FIGURE 2 Echo mask in display case. *Property of the Nuxalk Nation, Bella Coola, Canada. Photograph: Jennifer Kramer*

The Nuxalk Nation are grateful to the federal government for their assistance in the repatriation of this very important mask to the Nuxalk people. We are also grateful to the Williams Lake and district Credit Union for their assistance in storing and safekeeping of this mask.

Stutwinitscw [thank you] – Nuxalk Nation

Traditionally the mask would have been hidden out of sight and brought out only for winter ceremonials and potlatches. It is now on 24-hour display, visible to all who walk by the bank. The choice of the mask's location was based on a compromise between the Nuxalk Nation and the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board, who did not think the Nuxalk community center was sufficiently safe to prevent theft.

PROBLEMS WITH PHYSICAL REPATRIATION

Physical repatriation is assumed to be a restorative and beneficial solution to the historical problem of cultural objects having been removed from native communities and native possession. This is made evident by increasing requests by First Nations for the return of their objects. In the case of the Echo mask, the mask clearly did not revert

to an original way of being, but instead absorbed new ways of having ownership perceived. Ownership shifted from the individual or the family to the nation under the supervision of the Nuxalk band council and elected chief. The Echo mask's status changed because of its involvement with multiple systems of thought. The mask has been 'wrapped' (Jonaitis, 1992 using Jameson's 1991 epistemology) in layers of interpretation as it moved historically through time and into different situations. In this 'wrapping' the mask gained new meanings and value in a complex accretion process as it interacted with western art dealers, collectors, museum curators, scholars, the Canadian legal system and even the media. Because the mask's status changed in the process of its commodification, it cannot be 'unwrapped'. The Echo mask's meaning now encompasses its journey out of the valley and through the western art world, the Canadian legal system, and the history of its repatriation.

Equally important is the fact that the mask's journey and tortuous negotiations through Canadian law have changed how it is displayed by the Nuxalk. The bank building is not on the Nuxalk reserve, but on the non-native side of the town of Bella Coola. A large part of the significance of the Echo mask was its unveiling during specific ritual contexts, so being always accessible to outsiders' eyes is contrary to why it was carved. The label it bears in the bank display case renders the story of the Echo mask's sale and return integral to the way the Echo mask is discussed by the Nuxalk. It functions now as a motionless treasure fixed under glass. With all its mouths on display simultaneously, it cannot enact its various voices one by one and so does not fulfill its performative capabilities.

Because cultural objects are often not returned to their original owners in physical repatriation, but are instead returned to the First Nation, authorization of their display and use remain a contested domain. The native community continues to wrestle with the implications of the change in ownership. In November 2001, I attended a potlatch in Bella Coola where Echo appeared for the first time since 1995. I was curious to know whether the repatriated Echo mask would be danced and by whom. The mask used, however, was a newer copy of the returned mask. The fact that the Nuxalk do not appear to be dancing using the repatriated Echo mask suggests that the Nuxalk perceive this older mask as an heirloom, which needs to be preserved carefully and not submitted to the rigors of a ritual dance performance. This might reflect the rules of the federal Department of Heritage and the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board, which state that the Nuxalk Nation must keep the Echo mask within what is termed a 'safe' location. It implies that the Nuxalk are being cautioned to follow a western style of conservation and preservation of objects,

rather than a Nuxalk one of 'cultural perpetuation' (*gii-dahl-guud-sliiaay*, 1995).

However, this solution of treating the mask as a 'museum object' allows the Nuxalk to avoid deciding who would perform the dance if the mask were brought out to be danced at a potlatch. In this way, the Nuxalk are able to sidestep the complex issue of authority over the old Echo mask. While on the surface, the Nuxalk appear to have resolved their internal differences, when I asked various Nuxalk what they felt about the Echo mask's new location and new status as nationally owned, many hesitated to respond. Others seemed unwilling to make a declarative statement, neither affirming nor criticizing the mask's new status. I perceive that this ambivalence relates to the fact that many Nuxalk feel caught between their family loyalties and their loyalty to the Nuxalk Nation.

From this perspective, the Echo mask's physical repatriation appears unsatisfactory, for it did not resolve control issues – the Nuxalk must still worry about the future status of the mask and who has the right to dance it. The elected band chief told me that the repatriated Echo mask is now under the stewardship of the elected band council, which follows the mandate of the voting Nuxalk Nation. This is a democratic decision-making system relying on a quorum of voters, and is a radical alternative to the former method in which either a secret society initiate decided when the mask would be danced or a family, under the guidance of a hereditary chief, selected someone to represent their crest figure.

Another problem arising from physical repatriation is that First Nations must become adept at arguing their ownership in western terms if they want objects to be returned to them – a zero sum game in which one side wins possession and another side loses possession. This creates a paradoxical situation, because First Nations have been trying to teach the West that relationships to cultural objects are not about object ownership per se, but about an *inalienable* connection between objects and their custodians, which western legal ideas about ownership do not encompass.

Ironically, the Nuxalk were forced to use the Canadian legal system to make their claim that the elder did not have the right to alienate the mask, because according to Nuxalk traditional law it could not be owned, but merely custodially possessed. They were compelled to use the foreign concepts of Canada's court system, to cite a Nuxalk principle, but then only to have the mask's status changed to nationally owned upon its return. Doxtator would view this strategy as counter to the goals of repatriation, since an aboriginal conception was not maintained.

SUMMARY OF ECHO MASK'S JOURNEY

The Nuxalk repatriation of the Echo mask can be read in numerous ways. From one perspective, the physical return of this mask can be celebrated because the Nuxalk Nation worked together to return a vital, sacred mask to the community. They sought a new solution to what had previously been a very difficult situation among Nuxalk individuals and families. The Nuxalk displayed to the rest of the world a unified front, solidly representing Nuxalk national identity. The Echo mask's physical repatriation has mobilized renewed community interest in Nuxalk culture, and provided a venue for the Nuxalk people to unite under a common banner as a nation rather than as a group of fighting extended families. I was even told by some informants that the elder might have sold the Echo mask in order to alert the Nuxalk to what they could be losing – a wake-up call of sorts to emphasize the importance of Nuxalk culture.

From another perspective, this case can be read as a failure to untangle the dilemma of ownership. Thus, physical repatriation should not be viewed, as it traditionally has been, as a complete reversion to an original way of being. The physical repatriation of the Nuxalk Echo mask did not result in seamless erasure of its sale or commodification. The Nuxalk will continue to wrestle with the implications of Nuxalk national ownership of the Echo mask, and will be required to make decisions about how the Echo mask will be used or displayed. In summary, physical repatriation is not as straightforward a process as it is often assumed to be.

FIGURATIVE REPATRIATION

The story of the Echo mask brings us back to Doxtator's point that First Nations need to take responsibility for their identities. They cannot allow themselves to use foreign concepts, such as Canadian laws about alienable property, in order to make repatriation claims, for when they do so, they perpetuate the colonization process through which First Nations were named, categorized and then controlled by outsiders. Doxtator makes a plea for repatriation, but only when aboriginal terms of argument are used and where the object is perceived as absolutely inalienable. As Clifford aptly observed, many native groups do not desire physical possession of their material property, but instead an ongoing connection with and control of these cultural objects (1997: 212).

For the remainder of this article I will focus on what I term 'figurative repatriation' as a possible alternative to this impasse. I refer to the idea that First Nations artists can regain control of their material cultural objects by locating political artworks in western spaces as metaphorical

acts of self-definition. In this way, contemporary First Nations artists make possessive claims for native cultural objects existing in museum collections by embracing them within newly created contemporary artworks. While this may be a more individual strategy for self-responsibility than that of a community physically repatriating, it achieves similar goals through different means.

Robert Houle, a Saulteaux, Ojibway artist and curator, has called this type of creative activity 'the arrival of the artist-warriors' (1991: 32). These are artists, often trained at western urban, formal art schools, who are brave enough to create artworks that respond to and sometimes appropriate the language of the western art world. Their artworks are displayed in western museums and art galleries – what Houle terms 'hostile territory' (1991: 32). Instead of choosing to reject these alien spaces, these artist-warriors challenge from within the power structures that be, which have defined and limited native artistic production. They respond to and contest the typical applied strictures of authentic 'Indian' art as traditional, spiritual, mythic, timeless, mysterious, ahistorical, rural and even 'well-made'. Houle states that he is 'convinced that art has the capacity to raise the spirit . . . That the place and process of creative activity, a place where the artist is at once powerful and vulnerable, is the site of political and cultural change' (1991: 35).

Museums are prime locations for this kind of conscious act. Clifford's notion of the 'contact zone' (1997: 191–2, borrowed from Pratt, 1992) recognizes museums as meeting places where transcultural processes can happen. While acknowledging that museums 'make borders' he also sees museums as potential sites for 'border crossings' (Clifford, 1997: 204). These border crossings are not comfortable or easy, but Clifford encourages us to 'work within these entanglements rather than striving to transcend them' (1997: 213).

I want to discuss two First Nations artist-warriors whose artworks constitute figurative repatriation. I will be using examples of their artwork selected from the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology's exhibition: *Raven's Reprise*, curated by Lynn Hill in 2000. This exhibition challenged both native and non-native expectations of contemporary First Nations Northwest Coast art by situating it daringly among the 'masterpieces' from the past. These juxtapositions were intended to be both complementary and jarring – forcing the audience to shift the way they typically thought about contemporary First Nations art.

These contemporary First Nations artworks are performative in the way that they strategically reiterate native assertions about self, culture and ownership. Their placement in a western museum is purposeful, as they require an audience's reception and are meant to engage a non-native museum-going public. Each time a museum visitor views an artwork a new relation of reception has begun. By positioning these

artworks within the normative space of the museum, where meanings are tied to certain canons of authenticity, the artist-warrior is able to unsettle the museum visitor by disorienting their expectations. In this moment of questioning, where categories of native art are undermined, it is hoped that the artwork will shift the visitor's perspectives to new positions of understanding. In the Butlerian sense, each meeting between artwork and viewer is a performance defined as 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler, 1993: 2). In making use of older native objects in the museum's collections, these artists reference the past, but in new ways. I argue that these artworks, as declarations of a native artist being received by a non-native audience, are social agents doing the work of repatriation and constructing contemporary native identities through deconstructing former ones.

JOHN POWELL'S SANCTUARY

I begin with John Powell, because his piece entitled *Sanctuary* inspired this article (Figure 3). Powell is a fashion designer of Kwakwaka'wakw descent who lives in Vancouver and has devised costumes for the stage. Powell designed a painted curtain to hang in front of the Museum of Anthropology's open storage collection of *hamsamlth* or mythical bird masks used during the Kwakwaka'wakw *hamat'sa* secret society initiation ceremony. This work plays with the multiple meanings of the term 're-cover'. Recover means literally 'to cover anew' in the sense of a lid being closed or a blanket wrapping an object, but it also means 'to get back or regain ownership'; 'to restore oneself to a normal state of health'; and 'to compensate for a loss'. All of these meanings make sense in the context of this artwork, which is an act of recovery.

On the curtain are statements boldly written in capital letters mixed with painted images of coppers and masked dancers, and photographs of his family. Powell tells us in block letter text that Kwakwaka'wakw mythical bird masks and coppers are not meant to be so accessible to outside eyes. They are supposed to be hidden away by the family who owns them, only to be brought out in specific moments of the winter ceremonials. Powell explains that he used a lot of black on this curtain, because it signifies the darkness experienced by the bird masks and coppers when in seclusion. The metallic paints, gold and silver, have also been liberally applied, as Powell describes, 'to shed light onto the world of confusion about our practices' (Powell, 2000: 8).

This artwork can be read in diverse ways. The coppers depicted on the corners of Powell's curtain are symbolic assertions of wealth and nobility, but they are also reminders of the absence of many Kwakwaka'wakw coppers from their communities of origin, since they are



FIGURE 3 *Sanctuary* by John Powell (Kwakwaka'wakw), 2000. Collection of the artist. Photograph: Bill McLennan

contained in the museum's collections. The photographs honor his relations – mother, grandfather, great-grandmother – who taught him a respect for his culture. Powell describes this work as 'an homage to those who fought to keep our ways' (2000: 8), but the need to display personal, family photographs in a public museum speaks also of loss. If their bond to the masks and coppers had already been recognized and respected, then the presence, names and family tree of the people in the photographs would not need to be asserted here.

The words on the curtain are printed messages, which both inform about Kwakwaka'wakw traditions, and caution against their appropriation. On the one hand, Powell's *Sanctuary* can be read as an offering to share Kwakwaka'wakw knowledge with those who have not been privileged to grow up with it – a point of access to his culture, a place where understanding can begin. On the other hand, this artwork is creating what Charlotte Townsend-Gault might call a 'no go zone', a place where limits have been reached and translation is being refused (1995: 99). Powell asserts his definitions about what is and is not appropriate in the display and interpretation of mythical bird masks.

The curtain, in literally blocking the visitors' view, also symbolically takes these bird masks away from the public. This work visually reclaims these masks from the museum for the Kwakwaka'wakw. Powell's argument could not have been made from within Kwakwaka'wakw

territory. His position is distinctly oppositional in nature and therefore needs the urban contact zone of the Museum of Anthropology in order to get his message across. *Sanctuary* requires a non-native audience's reception. It is a public assertion of the aboriginal right to self-definition. I would like to suggest that a figurative repatriation has occurred. Powell has not repatriated these masks physically, but in displaying his curtain *he* is regaining control. *He* is taking a stance on alien soil. He seeks a new opening for inter-cultural interaction and he does it by claiming the space of the Museum of Anthropology as his 'home terrain'.

MARIANNE NICOLSON'S *EVEN THOUGH I AM THE LAST ONE. I STILL COUNT.*

For my second example of figurative repatriation, I look to Marianne Nicolson's installation in *Raven's Reprise* called *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count* (Figure 4). Nicolson is also a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, resides in Victoria, and has an MFA from the University of Victoria.

Nicolson uses a series of painted and photographic frames to focus the viewers' eyes in on a photograph of her aunts and uncles as young children, and out on eight Kwakwaka'wakw bumblebee masks on the top and bottom of the installation. She depicts crest creatures in copper: two *sisiutls* (double-headed sea serpents), four wolves, and two parent bees to enclose the centrally located photograph in the warm embrace of genealogical linkages.

The bumblebee masks were sold to the Museum of Anthropology in the 1960s by Nicolson's grandfather, but the right to their use is still held by her family. In 1988, copies of these masks were carved and used as part of a winter ceremonial in Kingcome Inlet. The bumblebee dance is a children's dance where a mother and a father bee lead progressively smaller bees out onto the dance floor one by one. When the children are led back into their 'beehive' at the end of the dance, one child is discovered to be missing. The father circles the dance floor four times before he finds the lost bee child hidden amongst the spectators and the bee child is led home.

Nicolson's art installation could have been created in reverse, with her frames of personal photographs and painted crests encircling the bee masks, claiming them as Kwakwaka'wakw property, thereby metaphorically bringing them home into familiar surroundings. But instead, Nicolson does the opposite – the bee masks enclose the photographs of people and place. Nicolson knows that her family owns the privilege of performing the bumblebee dance, and the masks sold to the Museum of Anthropology are not necessary to enact this part of her heritage. But in choosing to place this art installation in a museum she is sharing her



FIGURE 4 *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count* by Marianne Nicolson (Kwakwaka'wakw: Dzawada'enuxw), 2000. Collection of the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada, Nb3.1494a-b. Photograph: Bill McLennan

personal link to the masks, teaching a non-native audience what kind of connections can be made with these cultural objects that are not based in the language of money or legal possession.

The title of the piece *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count* refers to a children's rhyme, which resonates with the story of this dance for Nicolson. The title should also sound poignant to a non-native audience, because it intimates that the artist had been lost, but is now finding her way. Nicolson's father is not native and she was raised and educated in mostly urban spaces. Nicolson has worked to reclaim her connection to her mother's Kwakwaka'wakw heritage by moving to Kingcome Inlet and learning about her inherited ceremonial traditions. 'She still counts!' she boldly declares, an assertion of her sense of belonging.

Nicolson recounts this search for her identity in her installation 'House of

Origin' (see McMaster, 1998: 102–5) referencing the Big House where ceremonial work takes place. This piece was part of the exhibition: *Reservation X*, held at Canada's Museum of Civilization in 1998. She states in the published catalogue:

The house is a symbol of that development, of seeking self. It is a strong symbol of identity, home, family, and community. I constructed a house to

be viewed from all sides, from both the outside and the inside. I wanted to express ideas about perspective and how people view other people's lives. In a large part, our lives have been highly documented, because others have imposed their perspectives . . . I wish people to have a viewpoint of my home and my experience. I also want to represent it in my own way and not necessarily have everything understood. (Nicolson, 1998: 101)

Following Doxtator's call for self-responsibility, Nicolson refuses to allow outsiders the right to define who she is by setting the terms of the engagement with the non-native world. Through her recontextualization of the bumblebee masks, Nicolson is reclaiming the right to explain these works and how they reflect her identity. By choosing to install her work in the museum, she acknowledges that they should exist in a space of interaction.

RECEPTION, REACTION AND RESPECT

Both of these artworks – *Sanctuary*, and *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count* – evoke uncomfortable memories for native and non-native people. These pieces respond to the history of colonization, salvage anthropology, the western museum's historic assertion to collect, label and display 'other cultures' in the name of science, Canada's 1884 anti-potlatch law, and the fact that cultural objects got sold and alienated from their makers due to the pressures of assimilation. These historic experiences make for an uneasy sharing of the museum space, rendering these works ambivalent – both offering themselves as the site for mutual understanding and as the site for setting limits to access. These artists deliberately display their artwork within western spaces to provoke reaction and acknowledgement, while simultaneously refusing to be defined by non-native people. The artworks serve as social agents, emissaries of the artists who created them, offering alternative futures to the ones suggested by the painful history of Canadian native and non-native interactions.

For the reasons discussed here, repatriation should not be thought of as a zero sum game, where First Nations communities win, and museums and western communities lose. We are not really in conflict over a non-renewable resource. Contemporary First Nations artists are producing the cultural objects that are required to keep aboriginal traditions and cultures alive and flourishing. Rather, many First Nations people point to a lack of respect and recognition for having survived and endured the difficult assimilationist history of Canada's colonization process.

Gloria Cranmer-Webster, the first director of the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, stated that the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation does not need their cultural objects repatriated in order to dance them, since they have artists making new material for the spiritual health of the

community. They need objects repatriated 'to rectify a terrible injustice which is part of our history' (Cranmer-Webster, 1995: 141). First Nations need to get this message heard by a non-native public in order for repatriation to really occur. Asserting this message is a way for First Nations to take responsibility for their culture and the way it is defined. Once the complexities and limitations of the physical repatriation of objects are understood, figurative repatriation can be appreciated as an alternative, offering other ways to foster intercultural relationships and achieve self-definition.

There is an important role for non-native reception of First Nations art. Both John Powell and Marianne Nicolson take a risk when they publicly display the products of their creative minds. They risk negative reception by a western art world that expects 'First Nations Northwest Coast Art' to fit certain canons of what constitute national art styles, or judgments of 'authenticity' and the 'traditional'. None of these pressures can be sidestepped when one displays one's works in a western museum. Nor can urban-raised First Nations artists control the reception of their works in their communities of origin – Will they be perceived as spiritual enough? Are they following proper protocols? Do they have permission from the owners of the crests or masks to depict them? Whose definitions will be followed anyway? John Powell certainly experienced this uncomfortableness in the reception of his piece *Metamoravinyl* (Figure 5), a plastic and pleather mannequin dressed as raven with a quilted copper on her chest like a superhero's emblazoned logo. Referred to as the 'unfortunate lady', it was both panned by the *Vancouver Sun* art critic, Michael Scott (2000: E4), and rejected by Kwakwaka'wakw elders who felt Powell was dishonoring and offending his traditions and culture.

Given all these difficulties, I argue John Powell and Marianne Nicolson practice figurative repatriation – a return home. They both capture Kwakwaka'wakw cultural objects within their own system of meaning and they attempt to teach the non-native public about their culture, thus turning 'foreign terrain' into familiar, comfortable space. Although these figurative repatriations are individual, artistic strategies, not necessarily condoned by local indigenous communities, they share the goals of physical repatriation although not the means.

As a result of the 1992 Task Force Report's influence, museum professionals have developed an established body of experience and case studies in response to First Nations requests for physical repatriation (Phillips and Johnson, 2003). Consequently, in 2000 the province of Alberta passed Bill 2 'The First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act' designed to allow the Provincial Museum of Alberta and the Glenbow-Alberta Institute to repatriate specific, already agreed upon, ceremonial objects to the Blackfoot

Blood Tribe and to the Blackfoot Peigan and Siksika Nations. Furthermore, the negotiated Canadian treaty process in British Columbia has provided opportunities for First Nations to claim the return of cultural objects. Requests for physical repatriation are prominent on the Northwest Coast where First Nations ideas about 'property' and 'law' are far more solidly developed than in First Nations to the east. However, the general trend has been towards First Nations throughout Canada voicing their connections to historic materials in museum collections.

Figurative repatriation, by placing both historic and contemporary material culture within public spaces, is bringing messages of First Nations inalienable ownership to non-native audiences. Contemporary First Nations identity is strengthened in this exchange between native and non-native people, via objects that focus the dialogue or serve as flashpoints of argument and reaction. Thus, artist-warriors' artwork can act as social agents, effectively repatriating ownership and control into native hands, while promoting native/non-native understanding.



FIGURE 5 *Metamoravinyll* by John Powell (Kwakwaka'wakw), 2000. Collection of the artist. Photograph Bill McLennan

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