These bundles are our children. We have to look after them and care for them. But they are also powerful. If we treat them properly and show them respect, they can really help us. — Daniel Weasel Moccasin

I was sitting at Daniel Weasel Moccasin’s kitchen table on a cold January morning in 1991. Daniel and his father, Dan, were explaining to me the meaning of Blackfoot sacred bundles, especially the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle that the Glenbow Museum had recently loaned to them (fig. 2). I had been with the Glenbow Museum for only a few months, and my knowledge of Blackfoot culture was woefully lacking. Although we were all in good spirits, the conversation proceeded slowly. I did not want to give offence by either asking intrusive
questions or making inquiries in a way that could be interpreted as impolite. Dan spoke only Blackfoot, and Daniel was not always sure how to translate words and concepts into English. They did make it clear that sacred bundles are very important and that they were anxious to tell me as much about them as they could without divulging information that was the sole prerogative of people who had had ceremonial rights transferred to them.

The following summer, I was invited to a ceremony in which the bundle would be used for the first time in more than thirty years. I prepared for the event by reading everything I could find about Blackfoot culture and about this ceremony, in particular. As things were about to get underway, Dan, who would lead the ceremony, invited me inside the tipi where the ceremony was taking place. Usually, only bundle keepers are allowed inside the ceremonial tipi; other observers and supporters sit outside. I was being afforded a great privilege. Dan also asked the person sitting next to me to explain what was happening, but, again, it proved difficult to convey what was occurring. My own research, while useful, had not prepared me for the atmosphere of the ceremony, which, even today, is difficult for me to express. During one long ritual, the bundle was unwrapped and a long pipe stem with eagle feathers, beaded loops, and other “decorations” was taken out. When Dan stood, shook the pipe stem, and began to dance with it, I was taken aback. Was this the proper way to treat a precious artifact? I was not entirely ready, at that point, to see something from the museum actually used. At the same time, the pipe seemed to wake up and come alive. Was a museum the proper place for it? As people thanked me at the end of the ceremony, I began to understand what the Weasel Moccasins had been trying to tell me about the nature and spirit of sacred bundles. On this occasion, people were welcoming home a long-lost relative.

Trying to understand and balance the duality in the perception and understanding of sacred objects has continued to be an important part of my curatorial practice. A few years after the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle returned home, I brought a sacred headdress to an aawaaahskataiksi (ceremonial grandparent) of the Buffalo Women’s Society, the Maoto’kiiksi. Before leaving the museum, I had stuffed the headpiece with acid-free tissue, carefully folded the trailer around more tissue, and placed the entire piece in an acid-free archival box, padding out space with yet more tissue. When I brought the package into the Elder’s home, she gasped with horror. The tissue was rapidly discarded and
the headdress was rolled tightly, wrapped in a cloth, and secured with twine. It was, in fact, swaddled, much as a newborn baby is enclosed for care and protection. Here, again, was an alternative way of understanding what these sacred objects are and how they should be cared for. Over time, I have also come to
appreciate that using these items is not detrimental to their well-being. In fact, their participation in ceremonies keeps them alive and vibrant.

As I participated in more ceremonies, I came to appreciate other aspects of sacred objects, especially the effects they have on the social structure of a community. Traditionally, a Blackfoot person would belong to a number of sacred societies, most of them age-graded, and each of these societies had its own ceremonial observances, in which specific sacred bundles played an essential role. As Reg Crowshoe and Sybille Manneschmidt (2002, 16) explain, “Because of these memberships in different societies, new ties to members outside of one’s own biological ties and social circles were established.” In the wake of contact, however, these ceremonial relationships gradually eroded, as the population was decimated by disease, spiritual practices were outlawed, and children were taught to be ashamed of their culture. By the middle of the twentieth centuries, relatively few sacred societies were still active. Yet it is abundantly clear that the people who are involved with ceremonies become linked in a support network. When sacred bundles are transferred, the families of the bundle holders assume special, sacred relationships with each other, becoming parents and grandparents to future generations of bundle keepers. Similarly, members of a sacred society become brothers and sisters with their cohorts. All of this is in addition to the kinship relationships that develop through marriages and births.

It has thus become apparent to me that understanding the meaning of sacred bundles requires understanding Blackfoot history, society, culture, and contemporary life. The historical and anthropological literature on these topics is bountiful, but it usually presents analyses from an etic, or outsider’s, viewpoint. Moreover, much of the writing has been done by academics, who are usually concerned with developing an argument to support a particular point of view. For example, Clark Wissler was interested in comparing cultural traits among all Plains First Nations in a search for the origins of various aspects of a generalized Plains culture. Walter McClintock, Edward Curtis, George Bird Grinnell, and others wanted to capture a romantic picture of a way of life that had disappeared when people were confined to reserves and reservations. As I became friends with Blackfoot people, I began to hear their explanations of their own culture and their own history. Sometimes the emic and the etic accounts agreed. More often, there were considerable discrepancies, leading me
to look more closely at the non-Native accounts. How far did they reflect colonial assumptions and objectives? As, for example, Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2005) points out, the lacunae that are created when the two perspectives do not overlap are both thought provoking and indicative of the distances between First Nations and the dominant society. These are also the spaces in which museums and First Nations negotiate the repatriation of sacred material.

As the Glenbow entered into more agreements to loan sacred material, I became more involved with Blackfoot ceremonies in an effort to better understand the implications of these loans for the museum and the community and to become acquainted with the community. I had been hired in 1990 as senior curator of ethnology with a mandate to improve the Glenbow’s relationship with Aboriginal people and with the freedom to develop my own strategies for accomplishing this goal. While I had the full support of the Glenbow’s then president and CEO, Robert R. Janes, some other members of staff were not convinced that developing a closer working relationship with the Aboriginal community was a productive direction for the museum to be heading. At the time, it was uncommon for Glenbow curators to undertake fieldwork, and some of my peers in the museum assumed that contemporary Aboriginal people would have nothing relevant to say about our collections, which are mostly historical in nature. In their eyes, I was wasting my time. Others were more concerned that our loans of sacred material threatened our identity as a museum and felt that any discussion of repatriation was inappropriate; after all, this was “our stuff,” and non-professionals would have no idea of how to care for it properly. I was also cautioned not to become too involved with the community lest I lose my objectivity and become an advocate for Aboriginal peoples’ causes. While this all sounds very reactionary today, in the early 1990s museums were just beginning to explore their roles as socially responsible institutions, to work directly with communities, and to redefine their goals and objectives and the nature of their existence.

The Glenbow’s first tentative steps toward repatriation also received harsh criticism from senior bureaucrats in the provincial government. They felt that it was the museum’s primary legal, ethical, and fiduciary responsibility to ensure the physical preservation of the collections for all Albertans. The ceremonial use of a bundle would, inevitably, alter the piece and diminish its historical worth and its value to the larger society. In addition, there had been
unfortunate confrontations between the provincial museum and a group of Kainai in the 1970s that might have left lingering suspicions among government officials. The authorities seemed to feel that access to sacred bundles for ceremonial purposes would lead either to their permanent removal from the museum’s collections or to their deterioration through repeated use—and, hence, to their loss to society as a whole. There was no legal precedent for repatriation in Canada, and although the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) had recently been enacted in the United States, no one in the museum community or the government could imagine what the full implications of repatriation would be (see Luby and Nelson 2008). The debate between the Glenbow and the provincial bureaucrats was protracted and, at times, heated. Twenty years ago, these were vital issues in the museum community, and while attitudes toward repatriation have shifted in North America, these debates continue to frame discussions between Aboriginal people and many European museums.

Through all of this, I continued to visit with Blackfoot people, participate in ceremonies, and invite ceremonial leaders to the museum to advise us on the appropriate ways to care for and interpret sacred and other material in our collection. There was an emerging body of literature that was concerned with issues of inclusion, voice, and representation in museums (see Clifford 1988; Karp and Lavine 1991), while anthropological writings were probing the nature of cultural knowledge (see, for example, DeMaille 1993; Gable et al. 1992; Keesing 1987; Marcus and Fischer 1986). I began to explore ways of using the knowledge I was acquiring to interpret the material in the Glenbow’s collection and the cultures from which they came (see Conaty 1995). The more I understood the Blackfoot perspective, the more I understood how much information could be missing from a Western-focused interpretation and analysis. I grew cautious about interpreting material culture from other parts of the world and suspicious of the nature of the Glenbow’s collections documentation.

Sacred Bundles, Their Loss, and Their Repatriation

The stories in this book are about the return of Blackfoot sacred material from museums to their homes. Most of these present the experiences of Kainai,
Piikani, and Siksika who have approached museums with repatriation requests. One account provides a former government official’s perspective on the machinations required to develop repatriation legislation and the far-reaching positive effects that have followed from these actions. Finally, the Glenbow’s open-handed attitude toward repatriation is discussed, along with the motivations of the staff who tried to minimize bureaucratic roadblocks to returning sacred material. In many ways, the difference between the Blackfoot perspective on repatriation and that of the museum community is a microcosm of the gap in understanding between First Nations and the dominant Canadian and American societies regarding larger issues concerning Aboriginal rights and treaty obligations. While these stories do not purport to offer a panacea for these larger issues, they do underscore where some of the disjunction lies and suggest ways in which accommodation and understanding can be achieved.

The stories presented here are historically and culturally important. Historically, repatriation represents an assertion of the human right to freedom of religious expression and cultural identity after more than one hundred years of concerted efforts to acculturate First Nations people into mainstream society. The success of the repatriation effort lies in an affirmation of cultural identity and an immense pride in that identity. The contributors all feel that people—both Native and non-Native—need to understand how important repatriation has been, and continues to be, in the ongoing effort to maintain a distinct cultural identity in the midst of overwhelming pressures to assimilate into the dominant society. But repatriation has not been an easy process. It takes time to locate bundles, research their histories, develop connections with museums, learn the procedures for requesting repatriation, and construct arguments that will convince institutional bureaucracies that it is appropriate to return the sacred material. Sometimes those seeking to repatriate such material also meet with resistance from community members who feel that “the old ways” have nothing to offer in a modern world and may even be harmful. Working through all of these issues requires a great deal of spiritual, mental, and physical effort. It is important that people understand that it has not always been easy to have sacred items returned from museums and that it is therefore very important that they not leave again.

When sacred materials return home, they have far-reaching positive effects. People who have worked hard to bring them home are adamant
that these consequences be discussed so that both community members and museum professionals understand that repatriation is for all of society, not just for those who care for the sacred items. Some of these effects include changes in the relationships among the people who are associated with the items: new relationships develop, and old support networks are strengthened. Sometimes, as is the case with many museums, these connections evolve from positions of mistrust and even antagonism to partnerships based on mutual respect. This, too, is a testament to the importance of sacred items as active community members and reinforces the importance of their return home from institutions.

The collection of stories in this book was done in the spirit of collaboration with the Blackfoot people who have been involved with repatriation. As Ridington (1998, 344) observes: “An ethnography that places the ethnographer’s monologue above the voices of the people being represented risks sacrificing effective engagement with its subjects. Monologic ethnography is likely to be bad (and ethnocentric) ethnography because its claim to objectivity may actually disguise the subjectivity of its singular isolated author.” However, discussions of theoretical models that may help us understand the museum–First Nations interactions on repatriation issues often involve relatively little participation from Native people, given that

most American anthropologists and literary critics view theorizing as their business, not that of the Native Americans whose lives generate the theorizing. . . . Even when theorizing reflects “the other” rather than attempting to manage without it, the language of the theory continues to be culturally monologic. It also invariably replicates the genre conventions of Western academic expression rather than those of Native Americans. (Ridington 1998, 344)

Ridington goes on to suggest that, for First Nations, storytelling is the “key to their way of theorizing” (1998, 346) and that creation stories, in particular, are connected in ways that help explain the nature of existence. For museum professionals, who may already be uncomfortable with the prospect of relinquishing control over their collections, the proposition of adopting such a very different approach to understanding the process may be untenable. A more normative approach to theory building may be more acceptable.
While repatriation is not normally considered to be a research project, it shares many characteristics with scholarly inquiries. First, the research question is formulated, usually regarding the legitimacy of a repatriation request. Then, information is provided by a First Nation regarding its culture, history, and ceremonial practices. This is compared with information gathered by members of the museum staff as they examine museum records, archival fonds, and published material. The two sets of data are scrutinized and evaluated for accuracy and used to determine if the request should be approved by the museum. The principles of interaction described in the following projects form the basic structure of ways in which museums and First Nations can interact with one another in mutually respectful ways. Many of the repatriation stories that follow describe positive experiences that are based on these principles.

In 2005, Julia Harrison compared two exhibits that she found to be exemplary models of museum–First Nations relationships. The temporary exhibit “Out of the Mist” saw Nuu-chah-nulth communities on Vancouver Island, through the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, working with the Royal British Columbia Museum (RB CM), while “Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life” presents Blackfoot culture and history in a permanent exhibit at the Glenbow Museum. Harrison (2005, 198) argues that the organizational culture of each museum parallels the traditional social and political structure of the First Nation with whom they worked and that “parallels at a structural level between institutional culture and that of the source community fostered a certain compatible resonance as to how a collaboration project may proceed.” The Nuu-chah-nulth are always aware of the “structural hierarchies based around the identification of families” (2005, 207), so that the identification of artifacts, the composition of text, and the selection of an exhibit title required that those with the proper cultural authority be consulted or, when such individuals could not be identified, that other avenues for decision making be explored. While the RB CM, founded as a provincial museum, now operates as a quasi-autonomous institution, it retains the levels of bureaucracy that one might expect of a government organization. This structural hierarchy was well understood by the Nuu-chah-nulth, and, rather than hindering the process, it may have expedited the project by enabling people on each side to discuss directly with others of similar rank. It was key that the RB CM understood the importance of these protocols and respected them.
Harrison (2005, 198) sees the Glenbow Museum as situated “firmly in the cultural milieu in which [it] developed,” that is, as a brash institution that is willing to “try something new, ignoring any warning that it may have been tried elsewhere, and failed” (203). The museum had been structurally reorganized in the 1990s, and a hierarchical structure was replaced with a “shamrock” model of overlapping spheres of influence, a model that promoted enhanced collaboration among all staff members, regardless of their substantive functional roles. This, according to Harrison, matches in a general way the fluid clan membership, situational leadership, and consensual decision making of traditional Blackfoot culture. She goes on to suggest that the Blackfoot individuals who worked with the Glenbow “were not drawn together through any formal structure” (208). This is not completely accurate, since almost all were recognized as traditional leaders who cared for sacred bundles, who had transferred these to others, and who, according to Blackfoot protocol, have the rights to teach about sacred matters and the authority to speak about cultural affairs (see Conaty 2003). To the Western eye, the structure may seem less rigid than that among the Nuu-chah-nulth. To the Blackfoot, the protocol is just as strict.

Harrison correctly cautions that her conclusions do not mean that institutions and First Nations with dissimilar organizational structures cannot work together. She credits individual staff personalities and a respect for First Nations protocols, which vary among nations, with ensuring the success of these projects. The message for all museums, I would add, is that it is very important to understand the cultural protocols and structures of the society that are embedded within all endeavours with First Nations. This helps us to understand the nature of discussions and the nuances of behaviour and can go a long way to creating a successful working environment.

Krmpotich and Peers (2011) describe a “community of practice” in which a group of twenty-one Haida artists, educators, and other members of the community travelled to the United Kingdom, in September 2009, and joined with museum scholar-practitioners to explore the meaning behind Haida artifacts kept by the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford and by the British Museum. Communities of practice, they argue, facilitate “reciprocal and intercultural learning that takes place when museum staff, academics and community researchers come together on respectful terms and with common goals” (423). Oral and written traditions are valued equally, and people move from the
Beginnings

... periphery to the centre and back to the periphery as various topics emerge or as one person’s particular expertise becomes important to a situation. In addition, community members come to feel comfortable within museum settings, just as museum and academic personnel feel more at home in the community.

Haida, like Nuu-chah-nulth, have a strongly hierarchical organization. The RB CM found that the willingness to acknowledge and adhere to Nuu-chah-nulth protocols was essential to the success of “Out of the Mist.” Yet the community of practice formed among Haida and Pitt Rivers staff included relatively few Elders and was dominated instead by artists and educators. As Krmpotich and Peers (2011, 434) point out, artists “often have an intimate knowledge of materials and processes of manufacture,” but, as they also acknowledge, Elders and those of special rank “tend to have had personal encounters with the kinds of historic objects held in museums or have knowledge of related oral histories referencing such objects.” By way of explaining why the Haida delegation included so few Elders, they indicate that travel was risky for older members of the Haida communities at the time, owing to the H1N1 influenza pandemic (435). There is, however, no indication whether Pitt Rivers staff followed proper Haida ranking protocols when they travelled to Haida Gwaii. While it is true that Elders can be valuable to museums as sources of information and insight, more to the point is the special status held by such people within their own culture and communities. Including them as primary partners indicates an institution’s acknowledgement of Aboriginal practices. Doing so also requires that the museum take some time to meet with communities and learn who the most appropriate people to speak with are and how those interactions should proceed. The benefits that accrue from this investment of time and effort can be significant in terms of an enhanced facilitation of the process and an incremental amount of knowledge that is shared; museums may learn more than they expected. In the end, it rests with communities to identify who should engage with museums and how information will be exchanged.

These projects, as progressive as they are within the world of museums, still retain the trappings of traditional research that is carried on within a neocolonial context. The research was initiated by the institutions, which also defined the parameters of the project. While boundaries may have shifted and blurred, the museums remained the primary drivers. The knowledge generated by the projects remained housed in the museums, as an exhibit, a database, or...
other manifestation. Although digital access is available (through the Glenbow’s Web exhibit and Pitt Rivers’s database), access is ultimately controlled by the institution, not by the community. Finally, the artifacts themselves remain in the possession of the museums and are not readily accessible to community members. Repatriation can move the idea of collaboration further toward a truly equal partnership. To do so, however, requires a different paradigm, one that enables First Nations to define the frame of reference in their own terms and to be assured that the results will benefit the community.

POSTCOLONIAL INDIGENOUS THEORY

The problems that First Nations encounter in having their cultures recognized and understood by the dominant society are most obvious when the issues involved require consideration by the judicial system. Bruce Miller (1998, 88–91), in a discussion of efforts to protect a petroglyph and associated sacred land, observes five types of judicial responses to claims of sacredness:

- The cultural grounds for the claim are taken literally.
- The discourse is considered to be part of a “faked” culture, and contemporary Native people are considered to be culturally contaminated rather than the genuine spiritual heirs of their ancestors.
- Fear and animosity are directed toward those who see themselves as fundamentally different from, and yet connected to, the dominant society.
- There is a search for uniformity among First Nations rather than an acknowledgement of cultural diversity.
- Legal strategies are adopted that create texts written and rewritten by non-Natives, resulting in a legally defined concept of Native culture that reaffirms modernist discourse.

Moving beyond these strictures can be difficult, especially when seeking legal status for the claims. When the Gitxsan sought a legal recognition of their traditional lands and practices, the trial judge ruled that oral tradition held less weight than the written documentation of Europeans at the time of first
contact. The former was biased; the latter was not (Kasmo 1996, 82). Within museum–First Nations contexts, an approach that privileges Western sources of knowledge and diminishes the value of traditional knowledge quickly leads to an impasse in which no one benefits.

Postcolonial theory recognizes the biases inherent in the accounts provided in many written records and leads us toward a history in which the disenfranchised and the illiterate are recognized as important components of society. This remains problematic for many First Nations people, who see their own issues and concerns compromised by the researcher’s agenda. Postcolonial Indigenous theory underlies research that is directed by Indigenous people. It is the community members who determine the research questions that are meaningful. The data that are collected will include information that the people themselves define as relevant to the research question. Sometimes this can be very different from that which the non-Indigenous researcher recognizes as important. The results that are presented must be acceptable to the Indigenous community, and the practical implications of these results must benefit the community. This research process is inherently political, since Indigenous people invariably define such research as a way of asserting their identity.

A postcolonial Indigenous hermeneutic requires

(i) affirmation of the autonomy and continuing relevance of indigenous religious traditions, (2) recognition of the integrity of the cultural-spiritual bond between indigenous people and their lands, (3) respect for communal processes as the proper location for determining all meanings and commitments, and (4) a rejection of all “us” versus “them” dichotomies and an embrace of kinship with “the entire created order.” (Stover 2002, 177)

Through these requirements, research moves from Western concerns to Indigenous issues, and from an emphasis on written evidence to a recognition that oral tradition is equally valuable. The perspective of the community is less likely to be filtered through the lens of the researcher, ensuring that a truly Indigenous point of view emerges and is valued.

Postcolonial Indigenous theory provides a valuable framework within which to discuss and understand Blackfoot sacred materials and their

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repatriation from museums to their home communities. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the issue was defined by Blackfoot ceremonial leaders as important to their cultural well-being. These people have been involved in repatriation for over four decades, and while the process is now relatively straightforward in North America, it has not always been so; indeed, discussions with European museums can still be problematic. The Blackfoot hope that, by making their stories public, other Blackfoot and museum personnel will avoid the problems that occurred in the past, while creating positive relationships such as those that are discussed here. Second, those who have been involved in repatriation understand the intimate connections between traditional Blackfoot knowledge and world view, on the one hand, and particular places on the landscape, on the other. Narcisse Blood and Cynthia Chambers captured some aspects of this relationship in their video project, Kááhsinnooniksi: If the Land Could Speak . . . and We Would Listen (2006). Some of this traditional knowledge was renewed as bundles were returned and ceremonies revived and as people began to consider what other understandings might have been lost or forgotten. Visiting these special places has been an important process for both Elders and younger people, one through which they reconnect with their heritage and renew their personal and cultural identity.

Although the stories presented here are individual accounts, they reflect endeavours that were undertaken only after a great deal of consultation and discussion among many people who are involved in ceremonies. The actions of one person were supported by many. Similarly, we began the project to record these stories only after consulting with a number of people and gaining their support. In this way, the communal process was respected.

Repatriation is important for many reasons, and its meaning to Blackfoot people has evolved over the years. Initially, the concern was solely with retrieving sacred material from museums as part of an assertion of their culture, identity, and rights. Over the past twenty years, the process has become more cooperative, although Blackfoot people will argue that they have made many more compromises than museums or government authorities have. So far, repatriation has generally been considered to be an issue that is primarily important to First Nations. In fact, it is a process that affects us all, for it is a route by which some of the failings of our colonial past can be acknowledged.
and addressed. Repatriation is a vital component in the creation of an equitable, diverse, and respectful society.

NOTES

1. About the project, see “Haida Material Culture in UK Museums: Generating New Forms of Knowledge,” http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haida.html, according to which “delegates handled nearly 800 Haida treasures, and also gave carving and weaving demonstrations, public talks, and public dance performances.” For an in-depth discussion, see Krmpotich and Peers (2013).

2. Stover is summarizing the interpretive framework proposed by Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver in “From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics” (1998). As Stover goes on to argue (2002, 182–83), postcolonial discourse must seek to “avoid the colonial legacy of a scholarship that objectifies and reifies indigenous realities from the distant vantage point of the ‘knowing’ outsider.” See also the discussion in Crop Eared Wolf (2007), 31–35.

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