Continuing the Relationship

Now their stay is coming to an end; they are going to be returned back to where they came from. And I talked to the shirts, because to me they are a spirit, there’s a spirit in there. And I talked to the ancestors that owned the shirts, and I talked to them that someday in the future, hopefully in my time, they may be returned back here, in a proper manner, I guess. But in the meantime, it was a big honour, it was something to be a part of. For them to be coming home, coming home to their people.

NAA TOO TSISSI (HOLY SMOKER) / HERMAN YELLOW OLD WOMAN

I remember realizing, “Okay, they’re coming to visit.” And they’re going to be coming here. Not knowing what was going to happen, I hadn’t really thought of, or how people were going to be affected, or what the rippling effect was going to be, or how this was going to affect me as well. But I also was quite aware that, well, they’re here just for a visit. But the realisation also that how many more other items out there that are in museums in Europe that haven’t come home. That are still placed in cool dark boxes, you know, in the corners, and have never been taken out, you know? Because the spirit of those things are still there. They are still very real. And I think it’s time. I think it’s time, you know?

DELIA CROSS CHILD

The Blackfoot Shirts Project has created several legacies: for Blackfoot and Blackfeet people, for museums in Alberta, and for museums in Britain. As well as leading to the revival of the transfer ceremony for the shirts in the Kainai Nation, the project has been a focus for a longstanding interest in heritage for Blackfoot and Blackfeet people who came to see the shirts. Meeting these ancestors was inspiring for youth and elders alike, and we hope that what Delia Cross Child has called “the rippling effect” that the shirts have had continues in these communities in the future.
LAURA PEERS: How do you feel about them going back to Oxford?

ALVINE MOUNTAIN HORSE: Well, it's sad that they're going to go back and they're going to be, we're not going to see them. To me, they're . . . I see them as almost like people that [are] going to be locked up again. Is there going to be anybody there when they're gone? When you're packing them up?

LAURA PEERS: What do you mean?

ALVINE MOUNTAIN HORSE: Like, when you're going, is there going to be a send-off or . . . ?

LAURA PEERS: Well, people have just started asking about that, and we're just starting to ask around with the more experienced ceremonialists that we know. So I guess that's one thing to ask you. We'll ask Narcisse and we'll ask Allan and Frank and Andy. What do you think we should do?

ALVINE MOUNTAIN HORSE: Yeah, because that was my thought. It's just like, to me, that's how I've been feeling about them, they're like, I almost think of them as matápi, as people. And now we're sending them off again.

LAURA PEERS: I have always spoken to them every time we've moved them. I address them as grandparents. So I feel that I should speak to them this time. And the only thing I can think of to explain why we're doing this is to say we need you to rest again so we can bring you back out for other generations. Their work isn't done yet.
At the Galt and Glenbow museums, the project has strengthened relations between the museums and Blackfoot communities. For the Galt Museum, especially, the project provided an opportunity to build relationships with Blackfoot people, to learn how to work together in culturally appropriate ways, and to think about how to take these developments into the future to develop exhibitions and public programs for a range of audiences.

In the UK, the project has had effects across the museum profession, and in other areas. It is important to note that the Blackfoot Shirts Project was always more than a museum project. The AHRC grant that funded the project was awarded jointly to the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, and the University of Aberdeen. Both institutions provided funding to support development of the application from the start, and research time for Alison Brown and Laura Peers. The University of Aberdeen signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Foundation of the Kainai Nation in 2003 to work together on cultural projects, following the repatriation of a ceremonial bundle from the university collection to the Kainai Nation, and so the institution’s support for the Blackfoot Shirts Project is an extension of this work. The university is continuing to develop its working relationship. Alison and colleagues at Red Crow Community College have run seminars by video conference to bring together students at both institutions. More recently, funding was awarded to the University of Aberdeen to coordinate visits by Blackfoot ceremonial leaders to the UK and for UK-based curators to visit Canada and Montana, in order to promote dialogue about the future of collections that have yet to be accessed by Blackfoot people. This work took place between 2013 and 2015 (Brown, Eccles, and Herle 2016). Collectively, these activities represent new directions for our working relationships, and the next step in a longterm research relationship.

Within the museum profession, the project has encouraged a range of museum professionals and university staff to learn about Blackfoot collections, and about cross-cultural work with collections. Representatives from all four nations in the Blackfoot Confederacy came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in the spring of 2011 to meet with curators and conservators from across the UK museum sector who work with Blackfoot collections in their museums, with university staff who teach on museum issues, and with students who will be the next
generation of curators. This was a rare opportunity for people to talk who would not normally have the chance to do so. Blackfoot people involved in the project discussed their participation and their feelings and concerns about artifacts that are housed in museums far from home, and UK delegates gave presentations on the Blackfoot and Northern Plains items in their institutions. The conservators had sessions together to discuss the knowledge of cleaning, stabilizing, and shipping shirts gained from the project; they also discussed the issues connected with handling sessions, including how to test for pesticide residues, how to evaluate artifacts for handling sessions, and what the effects of handling were on the shirts. The groups also visited the shirts in short sessions similar to those which had been held in Canada. Curators Gerald Conaty, from the Glenbow, and Wendy Aitkens, from the Galt, were also present to discuss the process of learning that their institutions have undergone to work with Blackfoot people.

At the end of the conference, several delegates based in the UK indicated how much the experience meant to them. Tracey Seddon, senior organics conservator at National Museums Liverpool, described the conference as “a rich and moving experience,” one that “will certainly impact on my approach to all First Nations material but also gives me pause for thought about the potential for engagement with all of our collections by relevant communities locally as well as worldwide.” A graduate student in anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Zoe Todd, wrote:

I really enjoyed the conference. It was really great to see officials from UK museums talking about their collections, and they seemed to be really open to repatriation. I also really enjoyed meeting Frank and Narcisse and Delia and everyone who came from Alberta and Montana. It seems like there are some pretty big hurdles to overcome, but I came away from the conference feeling pretty positive about the direction things were headed. Obviously, I have no training in museum studies, but it did make me a lot more interested in relationships between communities and museums. Like so many things, it seems like repatriation is really contingent on who is involved, and the ability of each party to be heard and feel like they are really working together. I appreciated that some of
the elders were also quite honest about how they feel about some of the challenges they face in doing this work. I think that’s important.

We know that there is much more to do. We accept Narcisse Blood’s concern that museums have not done enough with their collections in the past:

My question is “Preservation for who?” If the preservation of these shirts would serve the purpose of bridging the gap that exists in how we understand each other, then it is worthwhile to preserve them. But they haven’t done that. That is the argument that is used. “Well, we want to learn from them.” And I always ask that very fundamental question. As museums, if you are teaching, then why is there still such misunderstanding? Why is there still so much ignorance, you know, at a place like the Blackfoot territory? So it begs that question: “Who are you preserving them for?”

As well as the conference, which has affected work in UK museums, project staff have given papers around the UK, Europe, and North America to students, academics, and museum professionals (e.g., Richardson 2011a, 2011b; Brown and Peers 2013; Peers 2013; Brown, Big Head, and Cross Child 2013). The project has supported education through a website based on the Blackfoot Shirts Project (www.web.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/), which includes lesson plans designed by Blackfoot teachers as well as information about and photographs of the shirts. This site is linked to the Blackfoot Digital Library (www.blackfootdigitallibrary.org/), coordinated by Adrienne Heavy Head, where additional resources developed during the Blackfoot Shirts Project are available.

The shirts were exhibited in the Glenbow and Galt museums, and a temporary exhibition about the project itself—including three of the shirts—was held at the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2013 to share the project with British and international visitors to the museum, and to encourage public consideration of the responsibilities of museums toward originating communities, even when collections are overseas and have been there for centuries. This exhibition was intended to communicate why items like the shirts are still important to
Blackfoot people and what happened during the project. It included three of the shirts; a pair of the leggings that were collected with the shirts but which were unable to travel to Alberta because of their fragility; a video by the late Narcisse Blood about the project; artworks by Kanai High School students who participated in the project; and many quotes by Blackfoot people and project staff. One case featured new quillwork pieces by Debbie Magee Sherer, to make the point to visitors that this art form is endangered but still practiced.

In many ways, the exhibition followed the content of this book, telling the story of the project. The final section of the exhibition included reflections by Blackfoot people on the shirts’ return to Oxford. These comments ranged from Ramona Big Head’s thought that “To me, it’s the knowledge that we were able to repatriate from having these shirts here. You can take them back for another hundred years. We have what we need here,” to Amanda Grier’s statement, “Try and bring them back here to where they belong, this territory. Because museums want to preserve stuff to educate people, right? So they would be helping these girls, my daughters, and their children.” We also included Narcisse Blood’s challenging question, “Who are you preserving them for?” For UK audiences, where repatriation is still not a part of ordinary museum practice, though there is growing awareness of the complexity of the issues associated with it, some of these quotes were challenging. Nevertheless, in a series of interviews with exhibition visitors, and in comments left in visitor books at the exit, visitors expressed strong support for the project and for making items like the shirts accessible to Indigenous peoples:

> It is impressive and highly commendable to see that this museum has been able to adapt from a receptacle of conservation to one of a bridger of time and culture—education taken to a higher plane! I’m truly impressed.
> **PAUL H., AMSTERDAM**

> Reading and looking and listening to the story of these shirts returning to the Blackfoot community almost brought me to tears. This is a wonderful project and I hope inspires many similar connections with the peoples and communities and cultures that the objects and artefacts in museums like Pitt Rivers represent.
> **ELNIE, VANCOUVER**
Many visitors said, simply, that the shirts should go home. A few criticized the museum for portraying itself as “ethical” for undertaking such participatory projects when in fact it was unable to repatriate the shirts because of the university’s policy. Some noted the bigger picture: as one visitor wrote, “These shirts belong back in Canada with the aboriginal people. You do not explain how British colonialism made it possible for far too many aboriginal artefacts to be held at this museum—you have more than Canada!” Many noted their appreciation for the project, and the wish that the shirts would go home: “Respectful way to honour people’s lives today and connection to the past. Beautiful project. Send them home!”

While Blackfoot and Blackfeet delegates were in Oxford for the UK conference in the spring of 2011, they met with the director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Michael O’Hanlon. They said that they felt that the work of the shirts was not yet finished in their communities: that the project had initiated many good things, but that they were concerned these might come to an end now that the shirts were back in the UK. They asked if it was possible that the shirts might come home for a longer period. The result of this discussion is an agreement in principle by the Pitt Rivers Museum staff that the shirts could be loaned to the Glenbow. There are many details to finalize before this can go ahead: decisions will have to be made about whether to display the shirts there, and if so where and for how long; whether handling sessions will occur, and which shirts are still strong enough to be handled; which Pitt Rivers staff members would accompany the shirts to facilitate these sessions, or if Glenbow staff could take on this responsibility. As well, funding will have to be found for the project. This is another step in the shirts’ histories, one that would develop further the relationships among UK museums, Canadian museums, and Blackfoot people. Only in the context of such strengthening relationships can any future possibility of repatriation exist. At present, the shirts are resting until it is decided how to proceed.
ALISON BROWN: So what would you say to museums in Europe?

AMANDA GRIER: I would say pay consideration to the youth. The Blackfoot culture is a dying culture. If they rethink their repatriation policy, and especially with these Blackfoot shirts, try and bring them back here to where they belong, this territory. Because they—museums—want to preserve stuff to educate people, right? So they would be helping these girls, their age, my daughters, and their children. Because we don’t see those kind of shirts anymore. We don’t. And not too many people tan hides any more. It’s just like our culture is dying, and without it, these children won’t have an identity. And so that’s what I would tell them: we need them for future generations. They are preserving Blackfoot culture by keeping them, and I am truly grateful for that, but also if they think of even moving them to another museum, say, Glenbow, then it would really help future generations, the kids that are from the Blackfoot Confederacy.

JENNY BRUISED HEAD: If they’re not going to return them back to the communities, back to the tribes, take good care of them. Smudge them, talk to them, pray with them, I guess. And in a sense, help us that we understand what we are. Ask them to help us too, you know. They may be way overseas, but their spirit is still here with us; they’re . . . this is where they come from. And for whatever reason that they’re over there, that someday, in the future, that they make it back to our families, to our communities, so that we can be proud people, be proud of our history. Right now we read a lot about it in books, we don’t . . . We’ve lost a lot of elders that know the history. So I guess for the people that take care of them in the museums, it’s . . . I feel like I’m going to cry. . . . Take care, take good care of them. Smudge them, take them out of the dark places, the cold places, and just sit there and be with them, you know? I think that’s really important that they are not just going to be stored away for the next hundred years, hopefully not . . . Put them out in the open. Air them out. They need to see the sun; they need to see the stars; they need to see the world, not just [be] in the dark. Yeah, we are protecting them, but they are animate, too. They’re not just inanimate. There’s life, there’s life in that shirt, a lot, not a little.