

# Privileging Knowledge: Whose Right is It?

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## Abstract

Historical documentation is given great importance when cataloguing museum collections and for good reason: but what about other forms of knowledge just as relevant and important to understanding objects? This is an issue the Pitt Rivers Museum, [PRM] the University of Oxford's museum of anthropology and world archaeology, has been considering for some time. Ethnographic objects which are now geographically far from their place of origin might (or possibly inevitably) lose some if not all of their contextual meaning. How do we identify, consolidate, and utilise the information that is still available within and external to the museum environment and how, also, can museum curators build on it to identify and utilise new forms and types of information?

Museum documentation has often privileged the history of when, where and most importantly who collected the object in the field or in its eventual resting place (and all people and places in between). Information about the technology employed, how it was constructed and the specifics of who made the objects was often not collected or was subsequently lost. The circumstances in which the object was used, and cultural sensitivities that may surround it were similarly often not recorded in the first place, or the information was not retained.

In its efforts to try to address these problems, the PRM has evolved its own in-house developed collections management database to incorporate indigenous knowledge and current research as well as maintaining a full record of all the historical information currently available. In this paper I will explore the ways we do this by looking at examples from Indigenous visits I have been directly involved with, using the PRM Haida collections as a case study. I will go on to problematize how different knowledge forms are managed and presented. Whilst I believe that the PRM approach has many benefits and makes some inroads into decolonising museum practices, I also feel that there is more that could be done and the Museum should in future consider revising its structures of documentation. Our systems of classification and organisation of information naturally privileges institutional and historical documentation. Do our approaches to documenting ethnographic collections need a more radical rethink? My exploration of our documentation experiences may be helpful to other museums as we all move to develop museum care of collections for the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Museum documentation, Ethnographic collections, Decolonisation

## 1. The will and desire to act

In April of this year, I found myself speaking to a room full of museum peers, academics, artists and students at the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG)<sup>1</sup> Annual Conference. I introduced them to two days of what I promised would be stimulating and thought-provoking discussion on the prevalent theme of *'Decolonising the Museum in Practice'*. As soon as I had naively suggested hosting the annual MEG conference on this theme at a MEG committee meeting the year before, I felt serious reservations. The debate around decolonising museum

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<sup>1</sup> The Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) is a UK based but international subject specialist network for those with an interest in and working with ethnographic collections.

spaces was becoming more and more contested and had been a feature on most museum agendas at Oxford since the Rhodes Must Fall Campaign<sup>2</sup> to decolonise educational institutions had started in March 2015.

Museums as public spaces by their very nature are often visual enactments and reminders of colonial pasts. The inability, in the UK in particular, to confront these troubled pasts is made even more problematic in an uncertain future dominated by uneasy issues of nationalism, identity politics, mass migration and what Wayne Modest calls an ‘anxious politics in a postcolonial Europe’ (de Koning & Modest 2017). These issues come to the fore when representations of ‘otherness’, as collected by colonial officers, missionaries and anthropologists, are represented in ethnographic collections and displayed in museums. I immediately realised that the frustration that I have often felt with the movement to decolonise the museum centred around the belief that such arguments would often be articulated in European museums by people who at first glance might be identified as more resembling those figures in the colonial past rather than the under-represented ‘other’.

Having attended other conferences on this general theme including ‘*Reckoning with History*’<sup>3</sup> at the Centre of Material Culture Studies in Leiden led by Wayne Modest and ‘*Exhibiting Empire*’<sup>4</sup> at the British Museum, the discussions mainly focused on theoretical concepts expressed in academic debate and those mostly participating appeared to be white, middle class men and women, I freely acknowledge that I myself obviously fall into this category. What bothered me, as an Assistant Curator whose day-to-day involvement in museum work centres on collections management and documentation concerning myself with the cataloguing of archaeological and ethnographic objects, was that I walked away from these conferences with no sense of honesty. I left with a feeling of good will, earnestness and underlying frustration but no real sense that I could apply anything spoken about to everyday practice. I could learn to think differently, ‘check my privileges’ and be aware of my biases but I was limited by the constraints of working within institutional structures. There was no identified solution or commitment to any real practical change, rather a resignation that change on any meaningful level was not possible. Most distressing was that the question of who owns the right to knowledge and how knowledge is generated and disseminated in and by museums was little discussed in relation to databases and collections management systems. The museum collects and generates knowledge, this is an acknowledged fact, but there was little talk of how this knowledge is managed in terms of systems and structures.

All of this has left me with a feeling of continuing unease. I had hoped that helping to host a conference at the Pitt Rivers Museum would result in a discussion that would be more grounded in practice and how that practice might be changed as a tool in decolonisation and democratising ethnographic museums. My colleague, Laura Peers wrote of this MEG conference “*There was a grounded set of approaches to the theme over the two days, with issues of voice, agency, power and representation at the fore. I was left with the sense that participants are grappling in honest ways with colonial legacies and feeling their ways into how to unpack and address these*” (Blog ‘Brave New World Curator Friday 13 April 2018) however, she also wrote two days later having reflected more on the conference proceedings “*...I am frustrated by both the structural limitations and the failure to consider seriously the rights and needs of indigenous peoples by UK museums.*” (Blog ‘Brave New World Curator Sunday 15 April 2018). I share Laura’s frustrations.

For me also, it is the lack of change at a more structural institutional level which is the principle cause of concern and why I wish to argue that it is at this level, by interrogating the systems we work with and use to frame our understanding of objects and in turn cultures and humanity that we may enable a radical rethink. I am very lucky to have worked for an institution which has always valued documentation and been committed to documenting objects in the collections as fully as possible and committed to ensuring that all the information be retained in perpetuity. The institution has also tried to be very forward thinking in relations with Indigenous<sup>5</sup> groups. I am pleased to say that now, as I write this in the summer of 2018 with our own Pitt Rivers Museum

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<sup>2</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> April 2015, in a call to decolonise education in South Africa, at statue commemorating Cecil Rhodes was removed from the University of Cape Town. The protest movement continued to press for statues of other known contested figures to be removed including a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Oxford. The statue still stands today.

<sup>3</sup> Reckoning with History: Colonial Pasts, Museum Futures, and doing Justice in the Present. The Research Centre for Material Culture, Leiden annual conference held on 30<sup>th</sup> November – 1<sup>st</sup> December 2017 <http://materialculture.nl/en/events/reckoning-with-history>

<sup>4</sup> Exhibiting the Experience of Empire’ a one day symposium at the British Museum held on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2018 <https://bmtrainingprog.wordpress.com/2017/10/11/call-for-itp-fellow-applications-symposium-exhibiting-the-experience-of-empire/>

<sup>5</sup> I Use the term “indigenous” in an inclusive manner and follow the United Nations (n.d.) in not creating a definition which would restrict peoples’ self-definitions.

database and website being subjected to yet another reappraisal and enhancement that I am feeling more hopeful although the interrogation and motions for any change are still very much internalised within the institution. At this stage I am unable to offer any long-term certain solutions but I wish to reflect on the process we have embarked upon and review how we have chosen to do things at the Pitt Rivers Museum to date and show how there is still much more that needs to be done drawing on other examples internationally.

## 2. Brief introduction to the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) and history of documentation at the PRM

The Pitt Rivers Museum holds the University of Oxford's collection of anthropology and world archaeology. The Museum was founded in 1884 when soldier, antiquarian and archaeologist Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers donated his collection to the University of Oxford. Pitt Rivers was an influential figure in the development of archaeology and anthropology. When the Museum was founded, anthropology as a discipline was relatively new<sup>6</sup>. The General's collections spanned what we would 'classify' today as both archaeological and anthropological artefacts. We make this distinction on the PRM database using a field to add either an 'A' for archaeology or an 'E' for ethnography. However, for the General this distinction was less important than his perceived links between 'types' of object.

The displays incorporate archaeology and anthropology side by side. I dwell on this point as it is a matter of 'classification' and that is what I find interesting and important. It is such 'classifications' which determine how knowledge, ideas of knowledge and understanding of knowledge are ordered in the museum and indeed at the PRM it is these early classifications which continue to shape and structure what we do today. However, I feel the distinction between an archaeological object and an ethnographic object is less problematic than some of the other categorisation and classification we choose to adhere to. This desire to classify in a scientific sense was part of the wider colonial doctrine which one can argue underpins the museum as a 'Western colonial' institution.

So, at the PRM exhibits are arranged by typology rather than geography or chronology. We argue that this allows us to consider the tangible products of humanity in a framework of human ingenuity, much divorced from Pitt Rivers's original intention to demonstrate the evolution of form as articulated by Pitt Rivers himself during a special meeting of the Anthropological Institute held in Oxford on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1874 '*...The collection does not contain any considerable number of unique specimens, and has been collected during and upwards of twenty years, not for the purpose of surprising any one, either by the beauty or the value of the objects exhibited, but solely with a view to instruction. For this purpose, ordinary and typical specimens, rather than rare objects, have been selected and arranged in sequence, so as to trace, as far as practicable, the succession of ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed from the simple to the complex, and from the homogenous to the heterogeneous*' (Blackwood, B and Penniman, T.K. 1970: 7-8). It is clear that Pitt Rivers held a strong belief in evolutionary theory and applied this to the objects he amassed. He also uses the words 'primitive', implying a progression from 'primitive' (by this it is clear he means non-western), to developed, in other words 'western' societies. Another key function of the museum iterated by its founder was that of instruction. I emphasise these elements by way of framing the Museum in its Victorian context and the implications and entanglements this particular era of British history had with Empire.

The Museum was established with a founding collection of circa 20,000 objects. The collection grew and developed greatly under the curatorship of Henry Balfour, who after working on the initial cataloguing and display of the collections in Oxford in the 1880s continued to work at the Museum until his death in 1938. His successors continued to add to the collections and today the Museum holds around 500,000 artefacts, photographs and manuscripts. Balfour catalogued the collection under the influence of Pitt Rivers's own categories of thought. He diligently hand-wrote labels for displays which are often visible in the Museum displays. This data was later transcribed as historical data on the PRM computerised database entries in the primary documentation field.

In many ways these labels and their transcriptions may be seen as problematic as they often used now outdated and offensive terminology, place and group names. However, this data is important to the understanding of the history of the museum and collections and so is retained. There is argument to retain such labels rather than 'clean' up the language or destroy them. An erasure of the colonial past would be worse than

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<sup>6</sup> See the project website for 'The Invention of Museum Anthropology, 1850-1920' focused on the intellectual history of anthropology as a discipline as charted through activities and objects held in museum collections at the University of Oxford <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/sma/index.html>

the acknowledgement of it, for it did happen and history cannot be erased and certainly should not be forgotten or brushed aside as something our predecessors were responsible for during a different time. Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin argues that words, in practice, are never neutral descriptions, but always represent a specific ideology coloured view of the world (cited in Holquist, 1981). As much as this is true of the past it is also true in the words and language we use to talk about objects and things today.

More recent PRM curators and staff have added to the complex layers of what we refer to as ‘primary documentation’ throughout the years before and after computerisation. Beatrice Blackwood, an Honorary Assistant Curator and University demonstrator and lecturer in ethnology was pivotal in creating the card indexes started during the Second World War of which there are three categorisations: region, subject (‘type’ or ‘function’ of object) and donors’ sellers and lenders (Blackwood, B and Penniman, T.K. 1970). When moving to a computerised database in the 1980’s it was Blackwood’s classificatory system used for the card indexes from which the Museum based its terminology and thesaurus lists for ‘keyword’ and ‘class’ fields still used in today’s database and borrowed by other institutions in the UK with ethnographic collections.

As well as the documentation produced by Museum staff there is also the pre-documentation and knowledge produced from the original source of the objects before it arrived at the Museum. This was often what was recorded in the accession entry and it pins down what museums valued the most, provenance. However, as acknowledged in my abstract, this information is very selective. Early collectors and anthropologists entered the field with a mind to collect ‘native’ indigenous material culture. Often, they travelled to these far-flung places with their trusty edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology: for the use of travellers and residents in uncivilised lands* a useful guide to lines of enquiry issued to naval officers, colonial officers and missionaries. Compiled by the Council of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland and published in London in 1874 contributors included Pitt Rivers, Augustus Wollaston Frank (Curator British Museum), John Beddoe, George Rolleston and Edward Burnett Tylor all of whom played significant roles in the formation of early ethnographic collections and museums. This reflected the type of data which was collected in the field and recorded later in the Museum. Provenance in itself has become a topic of much debate particularly in the quest to address collections with ‘problematic provenances’ having been obtained by museums during the colonial era. Indeed, as the issue of return becomes more pressing on the political forum<sup>7</sup> a case for the discipline of provenance research has been made with emphasis across Europe but particularly in Germany. It is still up to the researcher or the museum to decide which part of the object’s history to focus on and why and this is driven by the documentation available. As already noted, often the emphasis is still put on the moment of the objects acquisition by a European institution or individual. This means that the artefacts history is told the wrong way around, ‘from the end’ (final disposition in the museum, rather than alternate lives it could and can still have), focusing on ‘routes’ (succession/points of ownership) instead of ‘roots’ (the objects past life before it’s institutional life), taken as a fixed and stable entity ignoring any elements of temporality (Forster, 2017).

And so, information about the donor and from the donor has often been privileged over information from or about the source which is often absent or nuanced/biased by the collector. My colleague Jeremy Coote in his examination of a Tongan *Tapua*<sup>8</sup> in the PRM collections problematises the museum’s need and desire to provenance material over the true reading of the documentation (Coote, 2014). Coote draws on the many layers of documentation recorded about the *Tapua* since it entered the Museum including inventory entries, notes and labels all of which are recorded on the PRM database entry for the object. The documentation shows that the object has had a complex history and life since entering the Museum, one much inflated by curatorial research, knowledge and assumption from the little information associated with the object before it started its life in a museum. Coote demonstrates how the Museum record can distract from the rather impoverished information about an object. This embellishment is often added as ‘curatorial’ knowledge as supposed to ‘indigenous’ knowledge. The PRM database does well to accommodate these many layers of documentation however where I feel it falls short is that this information is mostly present in one field of the database, a free text field called ‘primary documentation’ and, as demonstrated by Coote this field requires “*the eye of a 21<sup>st</sup> century curator to disentangle*”. If this is the case then should we be asking more pointedly, who has control of the knowledge acquired by museums? How are we making this knowledge accessible to our many audiences?

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<sup>7</sup> French president Emmanuel Macron’s statement made during a visit to Burkina Faso In November 2017 “I want conditions to be created within five years for the temporary or permanent return of Africa’s heritage to Africa” see <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/05/27/emmanuel-macron-says-france-may-return-museum-artefacts-africa/>

<sup>8</sup> A *Tapua* is usually a polished whale tooth or ‘polished ivory shrine’ associated with Tongan or Fijian gods worn around the neck. For the PRM one discussed by Coote see <http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID25910.html>



object a primary, unproblematic, authentic and authoritative source of knowledge (Swinney, 2012) and so readings of it are often taken to be fact and truth which is not necessarily the case. As we all know, the knowledge and information presented by such systems has been constructed. It is our reading of it which shapes our knowledge of collections and the PRM database can be read and interpreted in different ways by different people.

The Museum maintains the manual records and they are still in use today, backed up by the intellectual ordering of objects based on Pitt-Rivers' typological ordering of the founding collection but enhanced and maintained by Museums staff and curators in light of the collecting and research which had taken place since 1884 (Petch, 2002). Like many museums it was in the mid 1980s when the PRM was first able to computerise its documentation systems. It did so using Cardbox+ creating a database for collections by region starting with the North American collections. (Edwards & Mowat 1990). Progress in computerising the whole catalogue was slow and depended on project funding. It wasn't until 1995 that a large grant was awarded by the Leverhulme Trust to carry out detailed research on the founding collection and make a computerised catalogue of the 20,000 objects in the founding collection that the Museum moved to its current Filemaker Pro database. Skeleton entries were made for the entire collection based on the original accession book entries. To this day we enhance and add information to the individual object entries as we retrieve and work on objects for display, cataloguing and research. Due to a recent store move and the past successes of project funding we have been lucky enough to have the staff to slowly populate the database entries with information. It is in no way complete but the nature of Filemaker Pro allows for us to have a database which we consider a 'work in progress'. Filemaker Pro is a reliable and cost-effective system. It is flexible enough to custom design and change fields as we see fit. The Museum has a documentation group committee on which all users of the database sit to democratically decide and discuss any changes. Information is improved and added all the time. Historical information is never removed or deleted but notes are added and authored when it is found to be incorrect, information is layered in the entries to reflect the chronological order of added notes and sources. Fields have been added and revised over time but most have been present since very early on in its creation. I will now go on to discuss a project in 2009 which allowed us to work directly with a source community and examine how we incorporate Indigenous knowledge into the existing cultural and institutional hegemonies of knowledge through our collections management systems. Having reflected on past practice it is with benefit of hindsight and time distance which allows us in the present to be easily judgmental of the choices made by our predecessors. As museums professionals we have a great responsibility to many stakeholders and while we can acknowledge the unfortunate elements of past practice it will only be with hindsight that our successors will be able to acknowledge the shortcomings of current and future practice.

### **3. The Haida Project: Haida Material Culture in British Museums: Generating New Forms of Knowledge**

The PRM has a significant collection of material from the North West Coast of Canada. In particular material culture from Haida Gwaii (formally the Queen Charlotte Islands) of the coast of British Columbia. The PRM has 321 objects on the computerised database which are categorised as 'NW Coast Haida' the chosen term which appears in the 'cultural group' field of the database. This is a database field with a drop-down list of names of cultural groups. It was created with much care and diligence but in order to remain up-to-date needs to be reviewed. We are not sure if this will be possible in the work to improve the current PRM database as it requires the appropriate skill, expertise and time to get the list correct. The PRM source from where the material was collected and who the museum acquired it from (collector and donor are often different people) is varied including objects collected by PRM assistant curator Beatrice Blackwood, anthropologist Franz Boas, early collections from the founding collection including pieces collected by Frederick Dally and most significantly for the PRM Haida collections material collected and acquired from the Reverend Charles Harrison. In 1882 Harrison was sent to the North Pacific Mission in Masset, a principle Haida village situated on Graham Island, the largest of the islands that comprise the archipelago of Haida Gwaii. Harrison made an extensive collection of Haida material culture having had forty years of residence among the Haida. The collection itself is an early collection, as no other collection was made in the area until that made by James Dean for Boas in 1892. It is wide-ranging, and contains, amongst other important artefacts, a mask by the renowned Haida artist Charles Edenshaw, and four by the artist now thought to be Simeon Stiltha. Harrison, however, also wanted people to see objects of daily life, and so bowls, boxes, ladles and spoons are also amongst the artefacts he collected.

Thanks mostly to the work and efforts of my colleague Laura Peers the PRM has over the years built a strong relationship with the Haida community. Her work has led to research visits from small Haida delegations

and individual artist to the PRM in the 1990s and 2000s. It is that relationship which we hoped to further solidify through the 2009 research visit '*Haida Material Culture in British Museums: Generating New Forms of Knowledge*'. Such visits are evident on the Museum database, recorded in the 'Research notes' field of the database. They are recorded as comments, with named individuals and authored by museum staff. For example: '*in 2005 anthropologist Cara Krmpotich, who was conducting research for Laura Peers and the Pitt Rivers Museum, interviewed Haida Elder Mary Swanson, who was familiar with the words 'Lthwogie' and 'Stl Whul' (written on the mask), and said both mean 'evil', although she would spell the latter 'Stu'whul'. [ZM 9/1/2018]*' and '*Conversations with Haida carver and musician Vernon Williams and other members of Haida Nation, December 2005, suggest that the owl is known in Haida traditions as a bringer of death, and that this being is one of several used to frighten people in performance. The mask was not specifically remembered, however, nor were Haida people sure how it was lit from within during performance to make the eyes glow*' [Laura Peers, 07/04/2006].<sup>9</sup> and as a result of the 2009 visit on which will be my main point of interest for the purpose of this paper '*...It was the eyes of the mask that received most attention. Jaalen Edenshaw thought glowing coals would have been used behind the eyes to shine through the red cover. The metal plates might have kept the coals in place. Kwiaahwah Jones wondered if the mask would be snapped from side to side quickly so that the metal plates would move abruptly. Nika Collison thought you could use a lantern behind the mask to light up the eyes because there is so much space. People thought it possible that the eyes used to bulge out or inflate somehow to scare children...*' These comments are recorded on the database entry for a Haida mask, PRM accession number 1891.49.7. The mask was collected by Charles Harrison and was purchased from Harrison by the Museum in 1891. There is a field on the PRM database for 'maker', this field remains empty for this particular mask, we do not know who made it. Elsewhere, thanks to input from the Haida community and information in the first instance recorded by Harrison we are able to complete this field with artists names. Prior to community visits little is recorded about the mask, however, Harrison did record enough to spark conversation with the Haida. The accession book records 'From Rev. Ch. Harrison, 80 Halton Rd, Canonbury Sq. N. Collection of Haida objects collected by him.... - Large Mask = Lthwogie the kidnapper of wicked children. £45. [Purchase price includes 1891.49.1-110]' and written on the object is 'Mask used in ghost dance of 1885. Represents Lthwogie or Stl Whul, the kidnapper of naughty children. Haida. C. Harrison Coll. (MS No. 10) Purch 1891' It was Harrison's habit to write directly onto the objects in red ink. Harrison did well to record local spellings and names of the entity the mask was said to represent. Harrison also wrote more fully on the mask in his publication '*Ancient Warriors of the North Pacific*' he describes the context in which the mask was used '*The Lithwo-gi-ge or Ste-whul mask was adorned with swan's feathers and was used in what is often termed the ghost dance. It was supposed to represent an evil mythological monster which swooped down and carried off young people who then became like their captor. The ceremonial at which this was used took place in a dark hut and its big red eyes were made visible by a torch held in front of each. Strings were manipulated so as to impart a movement to the mask, and a low chant went on the while.*' (Harrison, 1925).

The free text nature of the primary documentation and research fields on the PRM makes it possible to accommodate local indigenous spellings, though when searching for an object in this way there are often variables on such spellings which can make it difficult. We also have to accept that ethnographic errors sometimes enter the emergent knowledge fields surrounding particular objects. The database entry for this mask has been greatly enriched through indigenous knowledge relayed by the Haida group who visited the Museum in 2009. Most of this information is now recorded on the database entries however, other multimedia capturing this information remains on a digital archive locked in the cupboard with the accession books, there is currently no way of accessing them in direct relation with the database entries. In this situation as with the manual records, access can end up being restricted to Museum staff who act as the gatekeepers in providing further access. However, it was realized early on in the funding application that Haida participation in the research network needed to be as intellectual equals to academic and museum staff partners (Krmpotich & Peers, 2013). With this in mind a copy of the digital archive also resides at the Haida Gwaii Museum and Heritage Centre in Skidegate, Haida Gwaii. A further example that the ways in which multi and mass media allow us to communicate and generate knowledge has advanced beyond the way in which we record data in the Museum. We have to consider more the epistemologies of multiple users. Indigenous groups often come with ambivalence towards institutions and the aura of 'authoritative' knowledge (Glass, 2005). Young people prefer to use social media, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. That is not to say that our systems are unable to adapt to these new ways of knowledge exchange.

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<sup>9</sup> Taken from the database entry for a Haida mask PRM accession number 1891.49.7

Rev. Ch. Harrison 80 Hallow R., Cambridge Sq. N.  
 Collection of Haida objects collected by him  
 1 Mask = Devil Doctor with long hair:  
 2 Mask = 'Unia' a principal woman or witch  
 3 given JN 2 Masks = deceased man + woman.  
 JN (mask with vertical lines on cheeks)  
 JN (mask 2 Masks = Stick or Mauled Indians.  
 decoration around mouth)  
 7 Large Mask = Lthwogie the kidnapper of wicked children  
 8 given JN Large Mask = Raven as 'Creator' + the 'Wanderer'  
 9 Large Mask = Raven as 'Creator'.  
 10.1 Mask = Ravens head 10.2 mask = Frog's head.  
 11-12 2 Chiefs or medicine mens head-dresses, one  
 of which belonged to Eekushaw.  
 13-14 2 models of Totem poles.

Fig 2: Photograph of the accession book entry for the Harrison collection purchased by the Museum in 1891. The mask is item 7 on the list.



Fig 3: Haida mask collected by Harrison and purchased by the Museum in 1891; 1891.49.7

It was a real honor to be part of the 2009 research visit. It was my first encounter with a source community group of any significant size and so I was anxious about possible tensions between explicit Museum agendas and potential indigenous agendas. However, the main emphasis of the visit was one of mutual

understanding and respect for what knowledge each party could bring. More than a dozen members of the Haida First Nation visited the PRM and the British Museum to research nearly 700 Haida artefacts. Research staff from the community and from the museums hoped to jointly recover knowledge, memories, vocabulary relating to the historic artefacts and their on-going significance within the community. The visiting Haida researchers included curators, clan leaders, artists and elders with great knowledge of their material history and its cultural meanings. The group gained hands-on access to important heritage items supporting cultural knowledge and Haida identity. At the same time, the project allowed museum staff to have the chance to learn from community members and to create lasting ways of sharing knowledge about these collections. The project was unusual in its scale. The Leverhulme grant funded travel for 11 Haida research delegates. The Haida also undertook their own fund-raising efforts to bring even more researchers to the UK. In addition to working with the collections, the project aimed to develop new ways for museums and communities to work together to interpret historic collections and share this knowledge amongst the wider community. The project featured new forums for discussion between Haida people, UK museum professionals, and museum audiences<sup>10</sup>.

I took part in the logistical organization and planning of the visit whilst the Haida were at the PRM. During the PRM visits I also acted as note taker in the room with the Haidas. The note takers stood and ‘listened in’ on conversations hoping to capture as much information as possible to add to the database entries. This felt rather intrusive to me and whilst there was a notion that the visit would be reciprocal I felt that we placed too much emphasis on the need to acquire and add to knowledge often forgetting that the knowledge may not be there or may be emotional for the Haida to recall. For some of the group it was their first time out of Canada and their first time experiencing their cultural material heritage hands-on. In the museum we often regard such visits as an opportunity to improve museum records but I feel that we sometimes forget for whom we are doing so. The PRM, like many museums with ethnographic material, permit the addition of new information into the system, but rarely allow the same information to challenge or change the system itself. Indigenous knowledge is incorporated into catalogue entries, but indigenous taxonomies remain outside the system (Krmptich & Peers, 2013).

Great efforts to ensure that the database entries for the Haida collections were as complete and accurate as possible were made prior to the delegation arriving in Oxford. Every object was retrieved from storage or display including objects whose provenance was questioned. With the expert knowledge of Oxford post-graduate and project leader Cara Krmptich the entries were enhanced. As already stated, historical knowledge and data went unchanged but Cara reviewed and made changes to fields when museum interpretation had replicated inappropriate and sensitive terminology such as use of the word ‘grotesque’ in describing the stylization of some objects. Class and keyword categorizations were interrogated but global changes in discussion with the documentation committee were rejected. For example, a request to add ‘feasting’ as a class was refused. This was arguably for good reasons. Museums retain a desire for uniformity, databases need to be usable and searchable. In order to maintain the uniformity of the database, adding feasting would have required staff trawling all 300,000 database entries to add feasting to relevant objects entries across all entries. This was simply not possible with current staff resourcing. It is fair to say that this response privileged Western concepts of scientific comparison as articulated in database structures and systems over Indigenous knowledge, perspective and concerns. Project based funding often leads to such solutions but our systems are such that they are not flexible enough to incorporate and accommodate such change.

As we move to making changes to our databases today there is still grave concern within the collections section over the ‘cleaning’ of fields to make any global changes viable without jeopardizing the integrity of the database as a usable, searchable tool for all cultures over all time. I would argue that this is the downfall of most project funding. Work beyond the project often proves to be unattainable and project legacies are consequently short lived with limited possibilities within the scope and funding of any project to make fundamental changes to museum structures and systems. It should be acknowledged that any cross-cultural collaboration should challenge the foundations of thought within the museum. During the 2018 MEG conference Claudia Agustat, Curator of South American collections at the Museum of Ethnography, Vienna strongly argued that as well as decolonizing our collections and practice we should also decolonize our budgets, a very valid point.

With the flexibility of Filemaker Pro at the PRM we were able to greatly enhance the object entries for the Haida collections with valuable indigenous knowledge and multiple voices. We have to ask, what was it about our database which enabled this and what limitations did the database pose for the project? Where do we go next?

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<sup>10</sup> See archived press release on the PRM website for ‘International research network – Haida’  
<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/pressarchive.html>

## 4. The Future

The publication *'This is Our Life'* which was a key outcome of the Haida project also reflected multiple voices and forms of knowing generated and valued as a major success of the project as a whole. However, it did acknowledge a rather disappointing fact that ultimately museums databases remain resistant to structural and meaningful change. A more flexible system which was utilised for the Haida project was the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), co-developed by the Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lō Nation/Tribal Council, the U'mista Cultural Society, and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (Iverson, Rowley, Sparrow, Schaepe, Sanborn, Wallace, Jakobsen & Radermacher, 2018). In brief, the RRN is an internet hub for museums that facilitate exchange of information between institutions, Indigenous communities, scholars and the public. It acts as a single web-based search engine which draws on internal collections databases of different institutions allowing access to museum's all over the world with a single search protocol with the ability to upload and share information as well as links. This allowed for multiple user groups to upload data and knowledge. This was a great advantage for the project but I have not seen much of the knowledge generated from the RRN filter back into the databases at institutional level. Fundamentally, the RRN allows research to happen and categories of information deemed meaningful by different parties to receive the same space and privilege whilst the core of the museum – the catalogue – avoids structural change.

In reviewing our current database at the PRM, I think that we can be pleased to date that its flexibility makes room for multiple voices to be represented. Yet, the system still privileges certain types of knowledge over other types. We must acknowledge that whilst such voices have a presence they are subsumed within a Western database framework which can muffle them. We still refuse to allow Indigenous changes to drop-down menus and other core structural changes for the sake of Western systems of classification within our subject disciplines, which again, we should remember are Western constructs. As we look to the future, should we be thinking more about privileging people and relationships above privileging knowledge? Technology should allow for different forms of thought to be represented and accommodate a multiplicity of privileged terminology. Jenkins points out that catalogues and databases epitomize the tendency of museums to reduce three-dimensional objects to “inscriptions on paper, resulting in the simplification of the physical, non-verbal, and emotional meanings of objects, their complex multidimensionality, to words within scientific frameworks and classificatory systems” (Jenkins, 1994). How can we change the scientific frameworks and classifications that we work to and with to move to a greater understanding of knowledge which is not manifested in these traditional forms? Adapting the PRM database to a more relational model and incorporating different forms of multimedia would make inroads into allowing this.

It would appear that some of the more pioneering examples and work to date achieved has been so in countries in which the indigenous population still reside such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and so in many ways the geographical distance and space is not vast and it is easier for museums to work collaboratively with indigenous peoples. Often in these cases cultural heritage is tied into larger political issues such as land rights. Other examples have been specific to working with one cultural group where again it is perhaps easier to accommodate terminology that specific communities can understand. Museums which have more culturally specific collections can be protocol driven such as The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. One helpful way of thinking about contextual complexity reflected in ethnographic collections is by expanding existing musicological categories and practices (Glass, 2015). The difficulties with ethnographic collections situated within western institutions is that there is no one solution for the many cultures represented. Categories of information deemed meaningful by different parties are fundamentally different. Can such categories and different knowledge systems and ways of knowing be reconciled in a museum which hosts the world?

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion the catalogue and database that exist in museums are a point of tension. As museum professionals we need to be sensitive to and find ways to relieve this tension. To shift how different forms of knowledge is privileged, in this case institutional knowledge over indigenous knowledge, we need to rethink the structures within which we collect, present and store information relating to objects. The PRM database in many ways is very accommodating to the inclusion of multiple voices and knowledge forms as demonstrated by the 2009 project *'Haida Material Culture in British Museums: Generating New Forms of Knowledge'*. However, since

the project our institutional database is still inhibited by its association with organizational, cultural and political hegemonies that maintain their distance from the communities it needs to represent (Becvar and Srinivasan, 2009). As museums we have a duty of care to the collections held in our trust. The Filemaker Pro database at the PRM exceeds Spectrum documentation standards<sup>11</sup>. The newest Spectrum standard 5.0 has worked extensively on terminology lists, it is widely acknowledged that collections are better managed if standard terms are used but how do we reconcile the need for standardization with differing ways of knowing in ethnographic collections? There are no obvious solutions but we should be at a stage now where technologies exist to keep moving forward. Institutional and historical knowledge is often the only information we have about an object and so has naturally been privileged. The PRM has been quite revolutionary early on in the documentation process and the history of the Museum to record all the historical data available but we do not consider this an end in itself and need to keep moving forward in the development of our databases to allow for greater equilibrium for different forms of knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> Spectrum is the UK collection management standard devised by the Collections Trust, an Arts Council England's sector support organisation see <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/>

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