

Introduction to the Special Issue: Critical Histories of Museum Catalogs

Influenced by the past thirty years of postcolonial museum work, museum anthropology has balanced an on-going interest in object study with issues of repatriation, digitization, and community collaboration (Bruchac 2010; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Nash 2012; Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke 2013; Newell 2012; Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond A. 2012; Salmond Am. 2012). Collections, especially those resulting from a time of intense ethnographic and scientific collecting, are constructed from a complex interplay between custodial collections practices embedded in specific research epistemologies. Therefore in order to be successful, researchers require fluency with archival, documentary, and digital record keeping practices. These cataloging practices can be seen as the mundane and normative “inner workings” of museum practice. The intention of this special issue is to turn a critical eye to the interplay between *documentation* and *creation*, to position cataloging not as just a part of museum history but as a process that shaped (and continues to shape) museum history and anthropology. This special issue began as a series of conference papers at the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC 2014, as part of the panel entitled “Producing Anthropology Through Museum Collections: Conversations in Critical Cataloging.”¹ The papers presented there (and expanded upon for this special issue) were all conceived as a way to address a single issue – the organization and formalization of knowledge concerning material culture in museums.

In one respect, the history of museums is one of colonial collections and engagements with otherness – encounters with cultures, peoples, and objects previously unknown (Bennett 2004; Fabian 2002; Stocking 1988). Historicizing how collections were amassed and how a study of material culture developed and became normalized is important to a holistic understanding of the

development of modern ethnographic museums. In another respect the history of museums is one of documentation, authority, and control (Hull 2003, 2012). Although much postcolonial work has focused on the outward facing practices of museum work, from analyses of worlds fairs, to early exhibition design and development and early collections practices (Parezo 1987; Walsh 2002), to contemporary natural history dioramas (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; Haraway 1984), less scholarship has attended to the “behind the scenes” mechanisms which support (if not structure) these outward facing representations: the catalog and its historical precursors. Many of the following papers demonstrate the deep historicity of documentation and highlight the specific outcomes or ramifications when bureaucracy and documentation become tied to cultural heritage.

Further, the study of museum collections as objects of inquiry and sites of historical information has been reinvigorated in part due to the conceptual issues that have arisen through digitization and attempts to create shared access to cultural heritage resources (Beltrame 2012a; Beltrame 2012b; Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond 2012; Salmond Am. 2012; Salmond A. 2012; Srinivasan 2013; Srinivasan et al. 2010).² In the past, museums engaged with the public primarily through exhibitions and the physical arrangement of objects on display. Today, the pedagogical aspect of museums, particularly ethnographic or anthropological museums, is mediated through information technologies like the Internet. Museum objects thus continue to be made available online and circulate the globe virtually rather than just physically. The connection between knowledge and these technologies has been the subject of much philosophical and practical debate (Becvar and Srinivasan 2009; Bell 2015; Christie 2005; Geismar 2008; Glass 2015; Hennessy 2012; Hine 2006; Hollinger et. al., 2013; Isaac 2015;

Ngata, Ngata-Gibson, and Salmond 2012; Pigliasco 2009; Salmond Am. 2012). Approaches in the papers that follow are informed by research that has addressed the material histories of systems of classification and archival documentation as well (Bennett 2005; Bowker and Star 1999; Gitelman 2006; Latham 2012; Law 2008; Lemov 2015; Phillips 2011; Stoler 2010). The study of the organization and public dissemination of knowledge about museum objects requires not just a detailed discourse analysis of label texts and visitor surveys, but a deep examination of how museums' collections databases are constructed, the sets of specific standards and vocabularies used to construct the records, and as explored in this issue, the assumptions and impetus underlying the documentation of material heritage broadly. The museum catalog, as a set of records, a documentation system, and an embedded practice is thus the subject of each of the papers in this issue.

Although the call for a critical study of cataloging and documentation systems of this type is not new (Jenkins 1994; Pratt 1992; Hinsley 1981) research into the history of the creation of museum catalogs themselves is sparse. It is only in recent years that this field has grown in part due to increasing concerns about digital record-keeping (Beltrame and Jungen 2013; Bohaker, Corbiere and Phillips 2015; Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke 2013; Krmpotich and Peers 2013; Thomas 2012). Museum historians have often linked the development of modern museums to the practice of the natural sciences in the late nineteenth century (Bennett 1994; Stocking 1988). More recently these analyses understand the museum from a perspective that ties together science and technology and material cultural studies (Bennett 2004; Boyd 2012; Dias 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Latham 2012). As such, a new history of the catalog as an epistemological device or mnemonic has begun to take shape.

Many of these papers touch on issues that involve documenting Indigenous and First Nations collections. This focus, as is much postcolonial museum practice, is motivated by Indigenous scholarship that has sought to make the past legacies of colonialism visible across many different spheres (Cook-Lynn 1997; Cranmer-Webster 1992; Feldman 2002; Harris, Nakata and Carlson 2013; Lonetree 2012; Lonetree and Cobb-Greetham 2008; Smith 2006). Similar to studies of infrastructural systems, postcolonial Indigenous research seeks to understand the pervasive ways in which colonial or Eurocentric knowledge has been made to stand in as the metric against which other knowledges are measured (Agrawal 2005; Mignolo 2005; Nakata et al. 2012).

Indigenous postcolonial theory, with its clear connection to feminist scholarship and postcolonial science and technology studies, understands that in order to combat continued discrimination the histories of systems of discrimination must be revisited. As Donald argues, “we must first reread and reframe colonial constructs in order to see more clearly the language and logics that have clouded our thinking” (Donald 2012:549). Despite this, as Boast (2011) has recently declared, the museum can continue to be a site of persistent neo-colonialism and thus current museum efforts of collaborations must be realigned. Through recent collaborations with Indigenous communities, institutions and academics have found that museum catalogs (especially digital databases) may not be the most appropriate way to properly document or describe the cultural heritage of Indigenous communities (Christen 2008; Christensen 2010; Christie 2005; Christie and Verran 2013; Geismar and Mohns 2011; Hays-Gilpin and Lomatewama 2013; Hennessy 2012; Krmpotich and Peers 2013). Several scholars have focused on recent attempts to arrive at “postcolonial” databases or repositories (Bohaker, Corbiere and Phillips 2015; Glass, 2015; Rowley 2013) and argued that these systems must take into account Indigenous “ontologies” or

ways of knowing the world as opposed to museum-centric knowledges². Still, legacies of colonialism can continue to affect collaborations with Indigenous communities when it comes to making the documentation about cultural heritage accessible, either online or when visiting collections. In order to work towards a postcolonial equitable information infrastructure like a catalog, a full acknowledgment of the social history of the development of the system itself is the first step.

As one of the most important and pervasive institutions in the collection of anthropological and ethnographic information and objects, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) features as an important case study in several papers included in this issue. Founded by an act of Congress in 1846, the Smithsonian is one of the oldest collecting institutions in North America. Until the early 1900s the Smithsonian's NMNH was known as the United States National Museum (USNM) whose formal exhibits opened in 1848. Throughout the life of the department, research in the USNM's Department of Ethnology and the Bureau of Ethnology (BAE) fostered research and researchers who have had profound effects on the development of anthropology as a social science (Hinsley 1981; Nichols 2014; Parezo 1987). Determined to be a veritable "effect" by Greene (this issue), individuals within Smithsonian's USNM crafted many of the key ideas and processes of museum documentation still used today. This historical perspective is necessary in order to understand the "underpinnings" of cataloging work. Greene's paper brings this history of cataloging at the Smithsonian to the fore. She examines the origins of the practice of museum documentation across other early institutions as well. These records privilege some information while silencing others. It thus shows the origins of the common or normalized fields of description that many who work in museums take for granted. The way that

early objects are recorded in ledger books or catalog cards shows that contemporary ideas of an “authentic” record and the veracity of early information are often situated in the practical, or practice-based concerns of earlier eras. Greene’s work forces us to reconsider the historical practices that give way, or “afford” contemporary work – allowing for a kind of deconstruction of the catalog that we otherwise accept implicitly in our work. As Nichols (this issue) also examines in her work, the Smithsonian served as an important node in the worldwide dispersal (and disposal) of specimen exchange. In her analysis as objects circulated from the Washington to Leiden, so too did ideas about their form, function, and use. Turner (this issue) takes up this history in an era of increasing bureaucratization and computerization. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the NMNH began computerizing the long history of collections documentation, anthropological object records were translated from earlier paper based index systems. This results in “legacy data” that is often historically incorrect or outdated information in present in contemporary digital catalog. In each of these individual papers, the Smithsonian’s USNM/NMNH appears as a historically important collection of individuals and practices within a wider network.

Other cases feature in the papers as well. In Marsh’s work, the Wellcome Collection in London serves as a case study in the early documentation of ethnographic collections used as scientific evidence in a medical collection. The Wellcome Collection, established by Sir Henry Solomon Wellcome, is an example of a personal collection whose original collector documented the collections within his own epistemological predilections. In particular Marsh examines the documentation history of the cast of a Medicine Man whose epistemological context shifts through time as the institutional histories and “epistemic culture” changes (Marsh, this issue: xx).

The analysis of the medicine man from the Wellcome helps us understand how scientific institutions documented ethnographic knowledge; but when read across Greene's or even Nichols (this volume) work, this case perhaps more importantly shows how these interpretations were not often different from those of the self described "ethnology" museums in the late nineteenth century.

Lastly, in their paper, Krmpotich and Somerville (this issue) investigate records from a broad spectrum of institutions North American and Europe that hold Indigenous material culture collections: The American Museum of Natural History, the British Museum, The Brooklyn Museum, The Canadian Museum of History (CMH), the Glenbow Museum, the McCord Museum, the Milwaukee Public Museum, and the Museum of Anthropology (UBC). Their analysis also includes two Smithsonian institutions: the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). Their investigations post questions relevant to all institutions with an eye to future practice, rather than past. As singular case studies these examples are not a complete record of all museum cataloging systems that exist. Yet, based on the analyses presented within the papers, they can serve as representative examples of larger and more distributed practices that still require further study.

In addition to the contributions about specific cases and institutions, many of the papers demonstrate how the "ethnographic specimen" is constructed through a complex process that involves documentation. The reasons certain information about objects was made prominent and recorded while other information was not depends on the specific context of this documentation. Building on Greene's conclusions, Nichols shows how the cataloging of objects in the late

nineteenth century at the NMNH recontextualized the objects from North American Native communities as “duplicate” specimens. Tracking the active system of object exchange between the NMNH and other institutions during this time, Nichols demonstrates that the interconnectedness between different institutions had a great effect on how and why certain objects were transferred out and into museum collections. The catalog solidified or formalized the documentation and classification of objects as duplicates. This early information management system extended the scope of collections and also enabled the displacement of objects throughout the world. Long before digitization and the replication and circulation of images, the objects themselves were seen as copies and distributed as objects-of-knowledge. Nichols’ paper shows that even specimen exchange required well-kept documentary records and in fact may have helped to establish such practices in the museum context. This contribution shows that the establishment of cataloging practices was tied to the ability to circulate the knowledge “created” by the Smithsonian.

As these papers suggest, the creation of catalogs and the practice of cataloging is related to methods of authoritative knowledge production and control. The histories presented by Greene, Nichols and Turner are needed to understand why some kinds of data remain attached to physical and digital records longer than others and how this information can become an authoritative piece of knowledge engrained in practice. Turner (this issue) examines these themes in the context of museum computerization. Using the example of the Smithsonian’s Department of Anthropology, she expands upon the points raised by Greene and Nichols to understand how museum knowledge is produced in recent history through computerized media. Turner’s work investigates the “information infrastructures” within the Department by looking at a specific

moment in the history of anthropological documentation: the computerization of the catalogs in the 1960s and 1970s. Through an examination of the archival traces of anthropological cataloging practice, Turner uncovers how information about objects was mediated through the new technological medium of the database. This inquiry allows us to follow the epistemological choices that have driven museum documentation down to the specific and practical choices made by those responsible for constructing the catalog. Moreover, the continued performance of the ethnographic mode of description through repetition and remediation has many consequences for current work.

This collection of papers is therefore best summarized as a contribution to two key philosophical themes: the material practices of knowledge production and the affective relations that shape this information. A “material turn” is important for anthropology broadly but for museum anthropology it signals a possibility for anthropology’s re-engagement with museum collections both methodologically and theoretically³. It is now common practice to assert that objects can tell stories. Studying objects can elucidate and uncover histories and biographies that present us with new ways of understanding the past. Examining physical attributes like wear patterns or archaeological contexts can yield information about the individuals or communities who have used them (Bohaker, Corbiere and Phillips 2015). For some communities this information is held within their experiences and memories evoked by or imbued within the objects (Krmpotich and Peers 2013; Peers 2013). Working directly with objects continues to be important both in the context of recent critical theory that returns to the “materiality” of our cultural, social, and political lives (Fowler and Harris 2015; Ingold 2007, 2012; Parikka 2015) but equally for source communities whose artists, linguists, educators, and historians study older material heritage as

they influence the creation of new objects (Howarth and Knight 2015). The material turn also connotes a broader philosophical conversation that focuses on the material or physical attributes of modern information technologies. Scholars have shown that our new media technologies are not simply ephemeral but are made up of material objects that relate to the semantic construction of digital tools (like code) and research into information technologies must consider the material foundations and ramifications of the physical, semantic, or intellectual limits of these digital systems (Drucker 2014; Hansen 2004; Kirschenbaum 2008). Greene (this issue), Nichols (this issue) and Turner (this issue) all take up the concerns of “material technologies” in relation to creating and managing museum knowledges as well. At the end of the nineteenth century in North America, Greene finds that paper based technologies like ledgers and card catalogs can exhibit their own “agency” and impose their own (or the early catalogers) epistemological grids (Greene this volume:18). Turner (this volume) similarly finds this with respect to the digital catalog constructed in the NMNH many years later. The earlier conventions of recording object information identified by Greene were stabilized in the digital documentation. Through each data migration information was translated from medium to medium, which created a legacy of data that has, for better or worse, become attached to many objects’ histories. Turner puts forwards that these translations and mediations are the result of what happens when people and technologies come together in an uneasy balance between technological infrastructure and institutional practice.

Similarly scholarship that speaks to the “affective turn” has recognized the importance of attending to the encounters and experiences that occur between individuals or actors. Principally inspired by Deleuze and Guattaris’s philosophical work (1987) affect is thus not simply human

emotion but points to experiences between bodies. Affective theory as it has been taken up in the social sciences, calls attention towards the sensed experiences between individuals (Kim et. al. 2007), objects (Newell 2012), and even virtual or digital realms (Massumi 2002). Krmpotich and Somerville (this issue) take up the affective turn and imagine how human bodies act in relation to material ones (objects) as these objects are taken into museum contexts. Krmpotich and Somerville draw attention to the “affective presence” (or absence) found in the online documentation of selected objects of material culture common among Anishinaabeg and Cree peoples: octopus bags, moss bags, and bandolier bags. Although important in affective and personal family relationships (such as child-rearing) these objects are not often described using language that would identify these important affective relations. Rarely does institutional language in the online catalog record disrupt traditional museum-authoritative voice as is increasingly common within museum anthropology curatorship. A notable exception they find is the Glenbow Museum, whose records relay a different knowledge - one that upsets traditional modes of description and reflects the Glenbow’s legacy of collaboration. Likewise, Marsh’s paper (this issue) is concerned with affective relations between objects and bodies. Marsh elaborates on the affective relations between the individuals responsible for cataloging “scientific” material culture (Wellcome himself) and the objects themselves (the medicine man cast). Marsh explores how these relationships can be traced within museum records and how this ultimately shapes descriptions of individual objects. Ultimately, both of these papers ask how we can re-frame the normative practices of object documentation to, as Krmpotich and Somerville note, “promote a comparative investigation of affect across cultural and temporal contexts” (This issue: xx).

All of these papers interrogate a fundamental issue in anthropology and social science research that has yet to be addressed: How is the “raw data” of our studies not just found or collected – but actually constructed? How do historical ideals about evolution and classification continue to have legacies within collections work? Material culture has often stood as a partial record of anthropological work. It is important to understand how these objects are constructed and made in institutions; effectively, how is data produced to become objects that carry significant weight in the social scientific disciplines and to serve as evidence for research questions and new cultural investigation. Many individuals who work with these collections know that the histories of collection, documentation, distribution, and display are wrought with incorrect labels and missing information; that they are objects with complex lives. Indigenous people have also recognized that museum knowledge systems systematically ignore their perspectives. The papers here argue that this is not so much any fault or ethical desire to do so – but through the material and social aspects of cataloging that have evolved in the documentation of material culture through time.

The papers in this volume do not intend to be critical of past practice but more aptly seek to reconcile histories of practice within institutional settings and the broader histories of cataloging as such. Documents, whether formal or informal, have often stood to formalize some ways of knowing and occlude others (Appaudurai 1996; Hull 2003; Stoler 2010). As objects move through museum contexts and acquire new meanings we must remain attentive to the fact that our current practice is very much embedded and indebted to the past. Thus the contributors to this volume encourage readers to pay attention to what becomes normative practice and why, and

to create new venues for these discussions as we continually improve and attend to the theoretical and ethical outcomes of our practice.

Endnotes

¹ “Catalog” or “Cataloging” is usually spelled one of two ways: Catalogue (Cataloguing) and Catalog (Cataloging). The authors and editors have chosen to use the former, as this is considered normalized in disciplines that study museum and library catalogs.

² There are also collaborative projects focused on giving access to specific collections, for example: The Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC) <https://grasac.org/>; The Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) <https://www.rrncommunity.org/>; And the Mukurtu CMS platform, <http://www.mukurtu.org/>

3. The material turn (as it has been labeled) is often seen as a “return” to attending to the material foundations of cultural life. In the later half of the twentieth century, anthropological practice saw a turn away from studying primarily the material heritage of populations and increasingly focused on more situated ethnographic work with less emphasis on collecting and studying material objects. It has been argued that as scholarship has begun to understand objects as part of heterogeneous “actor-networks” the study of material culture as such has “returned” to the fore (Harrison, Byrne and Clarke 2013).

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