KULHULMCILH AND IIXSALH: OUR LAND AND MEDICINE: CREATING A NUXALK DATABASE OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

by

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Abstract

Museum staff have recently embraced digital technologies as an avenue for providing sustainable access to the cultural heritage of First Nations and descendent communities. While museums, universities and partnering institutions are increasingly collaborating on digital initiatives with Indigenous communities, the resulting projects necessarily involve compromise between parties working with often different goals, publics, and epistemologies. Understanding and evaluating the meaning, value, and success of projects that Indigenous peoples control at all levels is essential to improving future collaborative projects involving First Nations material culture, and to prioritizing Indigenous perspectives at all levels of museum work. In this thesis I examine the process of creating a digitized ethnographic database of museum objects, led by the Ancestral Governance Office of the Nuxalk First Nation in Bella Coola, British Columbia. This Nuxalk-directed database shows how vital Nuxalk culture heritage is to their land and sovereignty, and highlights the importance of the process of creating this database over the final digital product. It 1) challenges assumptions around the invisibility of certain value systems within museum collections databases, 2) emphasizes the future wellbeing of the next generation of Nuxalk people as an important motivation for this work, and 3) calls for more support for Indigenous-controlled projects like this one from the government and institutions caring for Indigenous heritage.
Lay Summary

This thesis looks at the process of creating a digitized database of museum objects, led by the Nuxalk First Nation’s Ancestral Governance Office in Bella Coola, British Columbia. I ask: What challenges/contributions/provocations does an Indigenous-controlled project like this one offer the field of museum anthropology? How is this work similar and/or different from collaborative digital databases formed in partnership between institutions and Indigenous peoples? In particular, this Nuxalk-directed database shows how vital Nuxalk culture heritage is to their land and sovereignty, and highlights the importance of the process of creation over the final digital product. It 1) challenges assumptions around the invisibility of certain value systems in museum collections databases, 2) emphasizes the future wellbeing of the next generation of Nuxalk people as an important motivation for this work, and 3) calls for more support for Indigenous-controlled projects like this one from the government and institutions caring for Indigenous heritage.
Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author. The fieldwork discussed throughout was approved by the Nuxalk Nation Stewardship Office and by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) under the title “Connecting Communities to Museum Collections: What Happens Next?” BREB number H17-00619.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Lay Summary ............................................................................................................................ iii

Preface ....................................................................................................................................... iv

Table of Contents ...................................................................................................................... v

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................... vi

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1 By Nuxalk, For Nuxalk .......................................................................................... 5

  The Nuxalk Nation, Ancestral Governance Office and the Digital Database Project ........ 5
  Collaboration, Process, Museum Collections, and Digital Databases ......................... 10
  “How did a girl from Indiana end up in Bella Coola?”: Research Purpose and
  Positionality ............................................................................................................................ 13

Chapter 2 We’re Always Starting from Something: Traces in Land and Databases on Nuxalk
  Territory .................................................................................................................................. 15

  Place-based Knowledge: Traces of Indigenous Knowledge and Settler Colonialism .... 16
  The Importance of Kulhulmcilh (Our Land): How Working on Nuxalk Territory Makes
  Visible Values Hidden within Museum Databases ............................................................. 19
  Databases as Relational and Material – Reflecting and Perpetuating non-Nuxalk Value
  Systems .................................................................................................................................... 22

Chapter 3 Medicine to Heal the Nation: Prioritizing Wellness and Indigenous Resurgence in the
  Process of Creating a Nuxalk Digital Database ...................................................................... 32

  Working Towards Iixsa (Our Medicine): Strategies in Database Creation ...................... 33

Conclusion For the Putl’alt. For Those not yet Born ................................................................ 44

Bibliography .............................................................................................................................. 46
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Beginning of the Coming of Age Ceremony, October 2017</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Map of Nuxalk Territory. Nuxalk Stewardship Office</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Coming of Age Cloak. National Museum of the American Indian, 2018</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Coming of Age Cloak. Nuxalk Stewardship Office, 2018</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Closing of the Coming of Age Ceremony, October 2017</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Stutwiniitscw.

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**Introduction**

“This year, when we do my sister’s coming of age, all of the things that she’s going to learn are going to stay with her her whole life. And we’ve seen the medicine of that…No – you can have all the masks in the world, but without the next generation there’s no more connection to the land, there’s no more culture, there’s nothing. I can see why this ceremony – the coming of age is spoken of so highly.” –Snxakila (Clyde Tallio)

Coming of age ceremonies have only recently come back into practice in the Nuxalk First Nation, and I was grateful to be able to witness one such event in October 2017 for my friend Snxakila’s younger sister. Growing up outside of Nuxalk territory, this became an incredibly meaningful experience for her and her entire family as they also shared songs and dances that displayed their inherited Smayusta (first stories). As people explained to me, a coming of age ceremony is a momentous event in a young Nuxalk woman’s life that marks the transition between childhood and adulthood. After spending four days in seclusion, learning from elder female friends and relatives, “aunties,” the young women are presented to the entire community. The exact moment of initiation involves removing a cedar-woven cloak, dyed black and decorated with dentalium shells (see Figure 1), and replacing it with a button blanket displaying her family crest, which the community validates through witnessing the ceremony. This

![Figure 1: Beginning of the Coming of Age Ceremony, October 2017.](image-url)
meaningful and joyful event represents a culminating celebration of Nuxalk knowledge and ways of living.

Three months before this event took place, I found myself looking at a woven cedar cloak strikingly similar to the one that would eventually be created and worn for this ceremony. I was working in the Ancestral Governance Office of the Nuxalk First Nation with Snxakila and Nununta, both Nuxalk cultural leaders and knowledge-keepers. Together, Nununta and I peered closely at a computer screen at digital images of another coming of age cloak, kept at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. In 2014, a small delegation had traveled to the museum as part of the Smithsonian Institution’s Recovering Voices program, which provides funding to bring Indigenous community members to museum storage spaces to view their cultural heritage in person (Kramer 2016). The group had returned not with objects, but with thousands of pictures and descriptions of pieces from the museum’s collections database, through which Nununta and I were now sorting. We speculated together on how this cloak could be remade, and talked about the value of cedar-bark weaving and the upcoming coming of age ceremony being planned for the fall, leaving aside for the moment our data organizing tasks. Although we had already entered this particular cloak into the database, technically completing its ‘digital return’ to the community, the value this knowledge would bring was only beginning to be realized.

Museum anthropologists have increasingly looked to digital technologies as a new avenue for providing sustainable access to First Nations’ objects that remain in museum collections, geographically separated from their communities of origin. Recently, these projects have involved the creation of digital databases which seek to incorporate localized, Indigenous ways of knowing to guide the management of their cultural heritage. Often the result of collaborative partnerships between museum scholars, anthropologists and Indigenous community
members, these databases necessarily involve compromise between parties working with very different goals, publics and ways of knowing. While these sorts of initiatives are valuable, understanding the strategies, values and insights from community-based projects that Indigenous peoples control at all levels is essential for all projects involving First Nations material culture.

In this thesis, I explore what is different about a digital database of museum objects when it is entirely controlled and created by a First Nation, outside of a collaborative context. I examine the process of creating a digitized ethnographic database of museum objects, led by the Nuxalk Ancestral Governance Office in Bella Coola, British Columbia. The Indigenous-controlled nature of this work reveals new insights when compared to similar collaborative projects between Indigenous communities and heritage institutions. This database shows how vital Nuxalk culture heritage is to their land and sovereignty, and highlights the importance of the process of creation over the final digital product. It 1) challenges assumptions around the invisibility of certain value systems within museum collections databases, 2) emphasizes the future wellbeing of the next generation of Nuxalk people as an important motivation for this work, and 3) calls for more support for Indigenous-controlled projects like this one from the government and institutions caring for Indigenous heritage.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I introduce the Nuxalk Nation and provide context for the purpose behind creating this digital database and the methods for conducting this research. I give some background on collaborative work in museum practice, specifically in regards to digital collections catalogues in order to explain why I have decided to frame this research around the significance of process and the Indigenous-controlled nature of this particular project.

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1 This is not to imply that my involvement on this project was not collaborative, as I discuss later. But there is a difference in orientation between creating a digital database to fit the needs of a collaborative group: of both heritage institutions and Indigenous communities, and this project, which was controlled and designed “by Nuxalk, for Nuxalk.”
In the remaining chapters, I highlight some significant insights that come out of this orientation. First the process of creating this database is influenced by the very land it is being made on: Nuxalk Territory. I show why the location of this work is important by arguing that traces of both Indigenous knowledge and settler colonialism present in the landscape altered how we saw other museum collections databases. Unlike most literature in the field of museum anthropology, which has described databases as containing hidden and invisible outdated value systems, working on this database on Nuxalk territory makes these values glaringly obvious. The second chapter discusses how the very process of organizing their treasures into a database that reflected Nuxalk ways of knowing can be seen as acts of healing and Indigenous resurgence. I explain what strategies collaborative database projects between museums and First Nations are adopting to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their work. In this project, the strategies Ancestral Governance Office staff are using to add Nuxalk ways of knowing into this database are ultimately very similar to other collaborative projects. However, this work, by Nuxalk, for Nuxalk, consistently prioritizes the future wellbeing of present and future generations of Nuxalk. This motivation results in a process of database creation that values the activation of Nuxalk knowledge into community practice. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on what implications this work might have for the future of museum anthropology.

\[^2\] Nuxalkmc means Nuxalk person or people. The Nuxalk were previously referred to as the “Bella Coola Indians.”
Chapter 1: By Nuxalk, For Nuxalk

“Our saying is ‘made by Nuxalk for Nuxalk.’ That’s our goal. We want to do it for Nuxalk – made by us for Nuxalk people so that they can understand it.” – Nununta (Iris Siwallace)

The Nuxalk Nation, Ancestral Governance Office and the Digital Database Project

The Nuxalkmc have never been separated from their ancestral land. They continue to live in what is known to many as the Bella Coola valley in the central coast of what is now British Columbia, Canada. The Nuxalk Nation is a combination of four distinct groups of people who formerly lived in different territories: 1) the Nuxalkmc, 2) the Talyuumc, 3) the Istamc and Suts’lhmc, and 4) the Kw’alhnamc (see Figure 2) (Kramer 2006; Nuxalk Stewardship Office 2017). Due to the smallpox epidemic in the mid 19th century, the villages where these peoples lived were abandoned

Figure 2: Map of Nuxalk Territory. Reproduced with permission from the Nuxalk Stewardship Office, 2017

and the survivors relocated or were forcibly moved by the Department of Indian Affairs to the village Q’umk’uts, now called Bella Coola (Mack 2006). Nuxalkmc remember these events as
part of the Four Catastrophes: the smallpox epidemic, the relocation onto reserves, residential schools, and the banning of the potlatch. Today, the Nuxalk Nation are united by this shared history, by their common language, and by the knowledge of their family lineages and Smayusta (first stories) which still connect them back to their ancestral territories.

This thesis is about a database in progress, designed for Nuxalkmc and managed by the Nuxalk Ancestral Governance Office. The Ancestral Governance Office is part of the Nuxalk Stewardship Office, under the Nuxalk Band Administration and works closely with the Nation’s two governing bodies: the elected council, recognized by the Canadian government, and the Stataltmc (hereditary leadership), whose authority has been inherited through their ancestral lineage. The Stewardship Office was originally created to support the protection and care of Nuxalk traditional territory. The members of the Ancestral Governance Office, Sxnakila (Clyde Tallio), Nununta (Iris Siwallace), Ts’xwiixw (Megan Moody), and Nicole Kaeschele, research ancestral protocols which provide guidance to current leadership on how the rights to their territory can be maintained. Because of the Four Catastrophes, the ways in which knowledge had been kept and passed on was disrupted. By interviewing elders and knowledge holders, researching writings on the Nuxalk from early anthropologists such as Franz Boas (1898) and Thomas McIlwraith (1992[1948]), gathering information from museum collections and revitalizing the Nuxalk language, staff are working to support the revitalization of ancestral governance (Nuxalk Stewardship Office 2017). For those working in this office, this work is part of a larger goal to support the continued sovereignty of the Nuxalk Nation and to re-build a healthy and holistic Nuxalk way of being for future generations. This aligns with work happening in Indigenous communities around the world, who see the process of turning inward to revitalize Indigenous nationhood as a form of Indigenous resurgence (Corntassel 2012; Simpson 2011).
The Stewardship Office as a whole first started using a digital database as part of this mission in 2015. They chose to work with Cedar Box Apps, a secure, web-based application, including maps and user-friendly data management tools, designed for helping First Nations governments manage and respond to proposed consultations and development happening on their territory (Cedar Box Apps 2017). This private online database has become an essential part of documenting and managing the research staff are also collecting on ancestral governance. With resource management in mind, they record Smayusta into fields called “case briefs,” which translate Nuxalk protocols for stewarding their territory into evidence they can use in a Canadian court of law. Cedar Box Apps offers standardized database formats for organizing cultural knowledge, with the idea that these fields can be customized to meet the needs of the wide variety of research the office collects.

When I reached out to Snxakila and Ts’xwii in 2016 about my Master’s thesis, they were looking to expand the Cedar Box App to include a comprehensive database of Nuxalk treasures\(^3\) found in museum collections. From 2013-2015, several Nuxalkmc traveled to museums across the continent as part of a project to bring Nuxalk, Heiltsuk and Wuikinuxv language speakers and knowledge holders to museum storage spaces to connect with their cultural heritage (Kramer 2016).\(^4\) One of the goals of this project was to re-activate the

\(^3\) “Treasures” is the preferred term many Nuxalkmc use to refer to their material culture. In this thesis, when I am talking about specifically Nuxalk material culture I choose to use this language. Terminology, as I later discuss, is important as a method of communicating value. In other sections of this thesis, particularly when discussing museum collections in general, I also use the terms “objects,” “cultural heritage,” “pieces” and “material culture.” In addition, I also use the term “belongings,” which is commonly used at the Museum of Anthropology and is the preferred term of many members of the Musqueam First Nation. I have chosen to incorporate all of these terms throughout this thesis not to confuse, but as a method of reminding the reader that even the very words we use carry important meanings, and our awareness of these understanding necessarily shift depending on who is doing the talking.

\(^4\) Called “(Re)uniting Voices and Material Culture on the Central Northwest Coast,” this project facilitated visits to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., the Royal British Columbia Museum and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, IL. It was organized by Jennifer Kramer at the University of British Columbia and has been funded through organizations like the Smithsonian’s Recovering Voices Initiative, the Bill Holm Center for the Study of Northwest Coast Art, and the Jacobs Research Fund.
knowledge of these objects for cultural uses back in their home communities. With this in mind, participants received digitized audio-visual recordings of the visits, copies of information from each institution’s collections database about the Nuxalk, Heiltsuk and Wuikinuxv attributed objects the museum owned, and took thousands of pictures of these materials. Nuxalkmc at the Ancestral Governance Office hoped to create a database to organize this information, and to connect it to the work that the Stewardship Office as a whole was already doing with the Cedar Box App.

What do objects in museums have to do with ancestral governance, land and resource sovereignty? For the Nuxalk, these things are all intrinsically connected through their Smayusta. More than simply origin stories, a family’s Smayusta tells of their connection to the first ancestors and their rights and responsibilities to specific territories (Hilland 2013; McIlwraith 1992[1948]: 36). These stories are displayed and validated through treasures; crests representing a family’s Smayuesta can be recognized on both historic and contemporary objects such as totem poles, masks, and button blankets. At a potlatch, a family’s rights are validated by a community of witnesses when these treasures are brought out and used in special songs and dances which tell their Smayusta. Jacinda Mack (2006:19-20), a scholar and member of the Nuxalk Nation, elegantly describes this connection:

Based on my grandparents’ lineages, I am connected to two different villages in our territory- Kwalhtna and Nusqalst. From these villages come my Smayustas, family crests and inherited responsibilities to protect these lands for future generations… Our songs become politicized with our actions, as they translate the basis of our laws. Similarly, when a dance is performed in conjunction with a particular song (they are paired together), permission from its owner must be obtained prior to dancing it, as that dance is the cultural property of an individual or family, as described in the Smayusta.

Even treasures which do not explicitly display family crests speak to a pre-colonial time before the Four Catastrophes that the cultural workers at the Ancestral Governance Office are working to bring back. As other scholars have observed, First Nations communities have often identified
and mobilized their cultural heritage in museum collections in support of their own sovereignty movements (Kramer 2006; Clifford 2013). The critical relationship between museum objects, Nuxalk territory, and Indigenous resurgence is a central tenant of this database work. And because it is being made “by Nuxalk for Nuxalk,” this relationship is always understood and never in question.

The thesis that follows is based on fieldwork conducted between April and October 2017, but also relationships that began in late 2016 and will continue long after the writing of this work. Before traveling to Nuxalk territory, I am grateful for the many conversations I had about this research in person, via email and phone with the ever-generous members of the Ancestral Governance Office. I visited Bella Coola for the first time at the beginning of April, and talked late into the night with several Nuxalkmc, reimagining together what work was happening in the community to which I could contribute. I came back to Bella Coola three times after that, spending approximately six weeks total on Nuxalk territory. We decided together that my role in the digital database project would be data entry, and throughout the summer I sorted and organized information and images of Nuxalk treasures still in museum collections adding almost 200 records to the new database. The majority of this thesis is based on participant observation, informal conversations and personal reflections from working in the Ancestral Governance Office. I also conducted four official, semi-structured interviews with Nuxalk artists and cultural workers. After returning to Vancouver to complete the coursework for my degree, I conducted a secondary literature review to provide context for these observations from my fieldwork. Throughout this process, I sought to hold myself accountable to members of the Ancestral Governance Office in the shaping of my research topic, the process of conducting fieldwork, interviews and receiving consent, and in the writing of this thesis. And in outlining the design for this work, I was influenced by writings on public anthropology, and collaborative and
participatory-action research methodologies, which seek to follow a relational, rather than data-gathering approach, and solicit feedback and insight in all stages of the research process (Atalay 2014; Hale 2008; Lassiter 2008). I wanted to conduct research that responded to the needs of my colleagues, now friends, from the Nuxalk Nation, and to produce results that are relevant and useful to their particular interests and priorities.

Collaboration, Process, Museum Collections, and Digital Databases

In this thesis, I explore how the process of creating a Nuxalk-controlled digital database of cultural heritage is similar and different from databases created in partnership between communities and heritage institutions. Though not always the case, museums and First Nations now have a long history of working collaboratively together. Indigenous peoples have advocated for rights and access to their cultural heritage that is housed in anthropology museums, whose collections were built with the support of imperial powers and taken from these communities in colonial contexts (Ames 1999; Bennett 1995; Clifford 1997; Deloria 2012[1973]). In response, museum scholars have shifted their practices and in the past decades have developed collaborative, relational models for working with their many publics (Peers and Brown 2003; Phillips 2011). These changes have also resulted from calls for an ethical approach to museum practice, which blurs the boundaries of what is considered traditional museum work and pushes for research that advocates for social justice across increasingly diverse platforms (Marstine 2011; Sandell & Nightingale 2012). Collaborative museum research recognizes that originating communities have inherent rights to their material culture and believe that they should benefit from knowledge resulting from these partnerships.

Today, these ideals guide an increasingly diverse selection of museum practices; collaborative projects with Indigenous peoples are changing not only exhibition and representation, but are also fundamentally altering how objects are stored, how information about
objects is organized, who has access to these materials and data, and even the very terms that should be used to describe them (Bell 2012; Hennessy et. al. 2013; Peers and Brown 2003; Phillips 2011). People working with digital technologies are also engaging with these provocations. Databases created in partnership between Indigenous peoples and institutions have been inspired by the growing interest in projects involving collaborative, community-based research (Phillips 2011; Lassiter 2008; Peers and Brown 2003). They also fit within interests of decolonizing research practices within both academic and institutional contexts (Smith 1999; Tuck & Wang 2012). Of course, this work also intersects and builds upon the varied and complex ways that communities continue to use their heritage in all formats to support their own priorities (Silverman 2015).

Indigenous communities and partnering heritage institutions are using digital technologies, from revising existing databases to creating new online platforms, to creatively explore how they can facilitate interactions with these materials across geographic distances (Srinivasan et. al. 2009; O’Neal 2012). Digital return, sometimes called ‘digital repatriation,’ refers to the practice of museums sharing copies of virtual images and information associated with objects in their collection with originating communities. These initiatives can provide great value to Indigenous peoples. Digital objects can be easily and inexpensively shared, reproduced and recontextualized outside the museum’s physical space, allowing for the reconnection to heritage objects over vast geographic distances. Unlike physical objects which, when presented and displayed within museums remain fundamentally framed by the authority of the institution and its wider public narrative, often retaining persistent colonial legacies of display and documentation (Silverman 2015, Turner 2016), digital objects present opportunities for unsettling the control institutions have over these intangible narratives (Bell et. al. 2013; Hogsden and Poulter 2012).
However, I take issue with the terms ‘return’ and ‘repatriation’ often used to describe these practices. Is it possible to return something that occurs, as digital objects do, in many places at once? Both phrases imply that the museum is actually yielding its power and giving up its control over these materials, which is not actually the case (Boast and Enote 2013). There is also a danger in using this terminology that institutions will come to view this work as an alternative to physical repatriation (Glass 2015). In addition, these terms imply a finality, a complete-ness to the process of exchange which simply does not reflect reality. The meaning and use of these digital materials is not realized instantaneously upon their return, but in fact requires careful attention, protocol and process as this knowledge is gradually reincorporated into community life.

The goals of collaborative museum work are also easy to celebrate but harder to put into practice. Who is invited to collaborate on these digital databases? Which audiences are prioritized in designing these online platforms? And importantly, who is in control? Critiques of ‘contact zones,’ which typically describe the physical spaces where these collaborative engagements take place, have cautioned that these partnerships can actually risk re-inscribing the authority of museums (Boast 2011; Silverman 2015) As museum scholar, Bernadette Lynch, warns, these spaces “are ostensibly devices for dialogue, but remain forever permeated with the power effects of difference” (2012: 147).

Cautions around collaborative work argue that it should be undertaken with care and reflexivity and also that we should pay special attention to projects happening independently of museums. In response, scholarship emphasizes the process of collaboration over the final product that results have continued to change and challenge a diverse set of museum practices such as exhibitions, programming and collections catalogues (Lynch 2012; Silverman 2015). Numerous scholars have called for more attention to the extensive work Indigenous communities
are doing to document and organize their knowledge in digital databases (Brown & Nicholas 2012; Carpenter et. al. 2016; Lawson 2004; Taylor & Gibson 2017). Indigenous archivists and cultural centres have been incredibly active and effective in establishing training and best practices for the respectful care of their collections, advocating for the return of knowledge and materials relevant to their histories, and sharing the knowledge from these records with their own communities (Srinivasan et. al. 2009; O’Neal 2012). Nevertheless, writing on these initiatives happening in First Nations around the world remains underrepresented. Evaluating the process of creating digital heritage projects that Indigenous peoples control at all levels is essential, and to move forward in this field without the inclusion of such knowledge would be inadequate for addressing the decolonizing aims of this work.

“How did a girl from Indiana end up in Bella Coola?”: Research Purpose and Positionality

People in Bella Coola frequently me asked how a freckled k’umsiwa (white person) from a small, Midwest town in the States ended up working on creating a digital database of Nuxalk treasures. It’s a good question, and one I’ve been reflecting on throughout this process. Since committing myself to the museum field as a college graduate, I’ve now spent almost a decade working in heritage institutions. I have seen how these flawed but well-meaning organizations are still entangled in colonial and capitalist systems which limit their own goals to work for the “public good.” In this time, I have also had to grapple with the history of my own family: European, farming immigrants who moved west onto Indigenous land directly following settler colonial violence conducted by the United States government. Coming to terms with my own identity, for me, has meant seeking to use my experience as a museum professional to be critical of the institutions of which I am a part, and to use these skills to support the priorities of Indigenous communities and their heritage work. I’m grateful for the unexpected directions these commitments have taken me and will continue to take me in the future.
The purpose of this research is both to highlight how the community-based control of this Nuxalk database project offers new considerations to discourses on decolonizing museum databases, and to serve as a resource for other First Nations that are considering or engaged in similar projects. It speaks back to similar databases conducted in collaborative contexts with museum and anthropology scholars, institutions and academics, arguing not that this work is unimportant, but that it necessarily results in different insights. In this thesis, I have also chosen to focus on process, not product. Practically, the database that Ancestral Governance Office staff are working on has not been completed, and so writing about what this digital database will look like in its final form, and how that may or may not differ from databases created in collaborative contexts is premature. But also, I found that the database itself is not the end goal as much as it is a tool, an avenue for communicating the research the Nuxalkmc in the Ancestral Governance Office conduct back into community practice. As illustrated in events such as Snxakila’s sister’s coming of age ceremony, the value of this database lies in its ability to facilitate knowledge towards the broader goals of Indigenous resurgence, ancestral governance and land sovereignty. Simply put, there is meaning in the process. I also hope that this thesis will bring attention to the many achievements and challenges of Indigenous cultural workers when it comes to retrieving and managing the stewardship of cultural knowledge and will encourage additional funding and writing on these important perspectives.
Chapter 2 We’re Always Starting from Something: Traces in Land and Databases on Nuxalk Territory

“You get more connected when you’re on your own land, being out here or out in the inlet or wherever you come from. You get more connected…That’s what we’re trying to do is make sure that our lands and waters will still be safe for our children and for those children yet not born – our putl’alt – and that’s our whole goal is to help to protect our land in this office and with the help of the Stewardship Office” –Nununta (Iris Siwallace)

For Ancestral Governance Office staff, being on Nuxalk territory is meaningful; as Nununta describes, it connects them to their Smayusta (first stories), to where they came from and to future generations yet to come. Being on this land also significantly impacts the process of creating a digital database of Nuxalk treasures. This chapter explains why conducting this work on Nuxalk territory matters. First, relying on Indigenous and anthropological understandings of place, I show how traces of settler colonialism and Indigenous knowledge are embedded and embodied within Indigenous land. This is especially relevant in this context, given the interconnection of Nuxalk treasures, Smayusta, and territorial rights. I argue that these place-based traces change how Ancestral Governance Office staff encounter museum collections catalogues that form the basis of the Nuxalk database they are creating. As described earlier, the process of creating a digital database starts with pulling information from already existing catalogues of these treasures in museums. I explain that, like land, databases also contain relational and material traces of value systems that, in the case of databases, are inherited in their creation and replicated through their use. These values, such as seeing museum collections as sources of scientific data and viewing First Nations culture as natural and unchanging, often do not align with Indigenous ways of knowing. By relying on theoretical understandings of databases, I show how seeing these information systems as both relational and material reveals how these values become inscribed and persist over time, despite changes in the field of museum anthropology that have rejected these values as outdated and harmful. Although writing in museum anthropology has typically viewed these ideologies present within collections databases
as invisible or hidden, I argue that conducting this database project on Nuxalk territory challenges this assumption. Bringing this literature into conversation with place-based ways of knowing shows that determining where this work happens is significant, illustrates the interconnection of Nuxalk treasures, land and sovereignty, and explains why these insights are more difficult to see within collaborative contexts.

**Place-based Knowledge: Traces of Indigenous Knowledge and Settler Colonialism**

Place has always been a foundational element of anthropological research and ethnographic accounts. Critiquing the assumed fixed, stable, and isolated understandings of place and culture, anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson advocated for the messiness of these spaces that do not correspond neatly to borderlines drawn on a map (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Tracking the circulation of people, ideas and movements has led to an understanding of place as “flows” or “constellations” of experiences that are always in motion (Appadurai 1996; Ingold 2011; Hinkson 2017). While acknowledging that places are not entirely reducible to human-centric understandings, for the purposes of this research I am interested in the reciprocal relationships between land and people and the embodied ways that spaces can be understood, experienced and created. As cultural and linguistic anthropologist, Keith Basso, compellingly described: “individuals invest themselves in the landscape while incorporating its meanings into their own most fundamental experience” (Basso 1988: 122). Importantly, this is a back-and-forth relationship that shapes the production of places throughout time, and is especially relevant for understanding the deep connections that Indigenous peoples have to land. Indigenous scholars advocating for place-based ways of knowing have also described land as a collection of reciprocal relationships (Coulthard 2014; Deloria & Wildcat 2001). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s observation in *The Production of Space* that “no space vanishes utterly, leaving no trace,” I see tracking the traces of these messy and shifting relationships to place as one way of
revealing what legacies are present and entangled together in the landscape (1991[1974]: 164). I understand traces as being both material and multi-sensorial, as anthropologist Valentina Napolitano describes: “both a form in space as well as the process through which histories and reminders of different worlds imprint and condense on a given space” (2015: 57). Looking at scholarship on place-based knowledge shows how traces of Indigenous ways of knowing, settler colonialism and resistance become embedded within the landscape for both communities and individuals.

Indigenous scholars have described how Indigenous knowledge and education comes directly from the land. In her article “Land as Pedagogy,” Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson begins by telling the story of Kwezens harvesting maple syrup as a way of illustrating how Indigenous learning occurs within relationships, both with and on the land (Simpson 2014). Stories, like Nuxalk Smayusta also illustrate, are intimately connected to place and provide instruction for being in the world and also communicate a set of relationships between individuals, the community and the environment. Importantly, traces of this knowledge remain embedded and visible within the landscape. Driving around Vancouver with an Elder from his community, Jordan Wilson, a museum anthropologist and member of the Musqueam First Nation, explains how Musqueam territory inspired a layered set of recollections – personal, biographical, and communal: “our territory and its places continue to serve as a container for our community's histories” (Wilson 2015: 9). I also experienced how Nuxalk territory is intimately entangled with story and knowledge. Lunchtime hikes and long drives up valley became memorable opportunities for sharing these stories, or as Nununta explained: “When you go back to our land it’s like being reborn again.” Land-based education views knowledge not as abstracted but as context-specific, and recommitting to the land becomes a method for reconnecting to social relationships that are also embedded within place.
In addition to containing important traces of story and knowledge, place also holds specific legacies of settler colonialism and Indigenous knowledge. Settler colonialism refers to the invasion of land by outside peoples with the purpose of settling and establishing control over that land, as is the case in what is currently the nation-state of Canada. It is distinct from colonialism in that it is premised on the elimination of Indigenous peoples and their relationships from and with the land (Wolfe 2006). Settler colonialism is also a global system, and is concerned with the control and management of people, always as a means of accessing and controlling resources and land (Veracini 2010; Wolfe 2006; Wildcat et. al. 2014). Traces of settler colonialism are inscribed onto the landscape in ways that have been naturalized and sometimes make their presence difficult to see. Historian Timothy Stanley charts these “ghosts” of settler colonialism in the city of Vancouver, showing how, for example, the prevalence of English, the grid pattern of city design and the place names throughout the landscape are all traces of an ongoing process that does not remain in the past, but are part of a continuing process of cultural production (Stanley 2009). Similarly, “being tied to land also means being tied to an unwritten, unseen history of resistance” as Indigenous peoples engaging in practices of hunting, fishing and living off of their land come in direct conflict with the state’s management of it (Simpson 2014: 20). Because settler Colonialism is critically dependent on the dispossession of land, even the act of remembering Indigenous knowledge tied to places is an act of continued resistance.

Next, I discuss how traces of both settler colonialism and Indigenous knowledge embedded within place are influencing the construction of the Nuxalk digital database. Staff working on this project are directly engaged with this process of resistance to settler colonialism through their research on ancestral governance and land sovereignty. This digital database connects Nuxalk treasures as representations of Smayusta and validations of family rights and
responsibilities to land. Because it primarily works with entries from already existing museum collections catalogues, Nuxalkmc working on this project also encounter value systems that do not necessarily align with Nuxalk epistemologies. This next section incorporates literature in museum anthropology about collections catalogues and explains what these values are, how they become rooted within databases and why they are often considered invisible. It is this narrative of invisibility that is challenged by the placement of this work on Nuxalk territory.

The Importance of Kulhulmcilh (Our Land): How Working on Nuxalk Territory Makes Visible Values Hidden within Museum Databases

Nestled snuggly under the mountain Nu-Hau-Hau-Da, the Nuxalk Band Administration building where the Ancestral Governance Office resides stretches back away from the road – a long, shimmery brown box surrounded by a giant grey sky and looming green mountains. Every surface and corner of the office itself is in use. Colorful pictures of elders line the upper edges of the walls, encircling the room and looking down on a veritable explosion of coffee mugs, poster-sized notepads and sticky notes covered in black marker-ed text in Nuxalk, the language spoken by Nuxalkmc. A large grey-scale map of the Bella Coola Valley hangs between the two computer desks. Easily visible on the map are the outlined acres of land colonial officials marked off for future colonist settlement. They also happen to be the same areas of land on which the village of Q’umk’uts, present day Bella Coola, among others are located. Historian Tom Swanky argues that colonial officials intentionally introduced smallpox into the valley, and that it was no coincidence that the disease killed over 90% of the people living on these select acres of land just in time for settlers to move in (Swanky 2017). This is also how Nuxalkmc remember this catastrophe. Across from the doorway are a list of 27 names in Nuxalk – the remaining 27 staltmcuks (hereditary leaders) who survived the smallpox epidemic, and whose people have continued to persist and grow through the present.
The above description provides an example of how traces of the past remain materially present within space, significantly impacting the database work undertaken in the Ancestral Governance Office. The vast majority of collaborative digital archiving or website projects seeking to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their work are happening in settler-dominated spaces such as museums, archives, or universities. In a museum context, the values that have shaped the construction of these databases are considered invisible and Indigenous ways of knowing stand out in a sea of standard practices. Conducting this work on Nuxalk territory emphasizes the importance of place-based knowledge, and how traces of histories of colonialism and resistance present in the landscape meaningfully impact the process of creating this database. Unlike most museum anthropology literature that understands these legacies as hidden, invisible, and normative, I argue that working on a Nuxalk-controlled project on Nuxalk territory makes these discontinuities starkly present.

I worked on data entry while in Bella Coola in the summer of 2017, contributing to adding Nuxalk treasures to the digital database used by members of the Ancestral Governance Office. On a day to day basis, this work varied greatly. Some days I worked entirely from museum collections catalogues like the Smithsonian Institution’s, sorting pictures and recording information about Nuxalk treasures. This work was always done in collaboration with my Nuxalk colleagues, and we would often have impromptu conversations about how to organize these treasures and what Nuxalk knowledge needed to be added to the records. The office is a busy hub of activity, and as Nuxalkmc dropped in to talk or see the work we were doing, the pace and focus of our data entry shifted in response to this constant stream of feedback and questions. Many Nuxalkmc care deeply about what cultural workers at the Ancestral Governance Office are doing and are eager to put their research into practice.
As described earlier, staff work with Cedar Box Apps to organize their research related to ancestral governance and land sovereignty. Because it is already being used by the Stewardship Office for documenting and responding to resource and development requests on Nuxalk territory, Ancestral Governance Office staff have chosen to expand this work to include a digital database of Nuxalk treasures. Cedar Box Apps creates connections between these two different projects through an in-application search engine, through “tags” (links which allow users to jump between records), and through “collections” (which allow for the grouping of records together). Ideally, staff hope to use these functions to express the connections between Nuxalk treasures, Smayusta and territory rights, however, because the Cedar Box platform is being used for such a broad variety of tasks it necessarily it makes it difficult to create a specialized database specifically for documenting these treasures. Practically, this means the names of specific fields cannot be overly specialized, and much information is left unorganized in general categories such as the “Summary” fields. As I will also discuss in more detail in the next chapter, this lack of specialization and prioritization of relational connections are a major difference between other databases created in collaboration between museums and Indigenous communities. It also means that for this particular project, the process of creating this database is more significant than the actual database itself.

Data entry begins by organizing photographs of Nuxalk treasures taken as part of the museum storage visits that Nuxalk, Heiltsuk and Wuikinuxv members participated in as part of the Recovering Voices program from 2013-2015 (Kramer 2016). These images contained traces of place-based knowledge that served as reminders of what relationships were missing from the museum catalogues from which we were working. As I have discussed, treasures, such as masks, illustrate important Smayusta which a particular family will have the right to tell at a potlatch (McIlwraith 1992[1948]). These rights are tied to territory, and are recognized by the community
who witnesses them told through dances and songs. As part of supporting Nuxalk ancestral governance and land sovereignty, we would include Smayusta related to these treasures in the records whenever possible. Snxakila explained this to me one day as we worked together in the Ancestral Governance Office: “Those regalias and masks are loaded with history. The families that brought them out would have had to have potlatches to validate the showings of those sacred treasures. In doing that, they’re also validating their rights to their land and territory.” One of the long-term goals for this database is to map images of these treasures directly onto a digital rendering of Nuxalk territory, connecting the Smayusta that they illustrate back to the land.

Looking at images of these objects also served as reminders of what knowledge has been lost over time. Researching the construction of the cedar-woven coming of age cloak with Nununta reminded her of the Four Catastrophes: “the smallpox epidemic, the reservations – moving the reserves, the residential schools, the potlatch banning… our people are still healing from these catastrophes.” When I asked about the goals of the Stewardship Office as a whole, and what working with museums has to do with this, the answers inevitably began with an explanation of these catastrophes. Like anthropologist, Fiona Murphy, who writes about “how trauma and suffering become materialized and indeed, archived,” I also found that these reflections occurred through interacting with the images of objects we were entering into the database (2011:482; Stoler 2009). These catastrophes were caused directly by settler colonial forces invading Nuxalk territory. Looking at digital images of treasures taken from the valley also sparked questions of how they left in the first place. “My grandfather remembers seeing these masks in their treasure boxes,” one Nuxalkmc said to me, gesturing at the computer screen where we were looking at images of masks at the American Museum of Natural History. “How did they leave? When were they taken away? No one remembers.” Ancestral Governance Office staff try to answer this question when creating records. Adding treasures to the database, we
noticed how they acted as traces of Nuxalk knowledge in their connection to place and histories of colonialism.

**Databases as Relational and Material – Reflecting and Perpetuating non-Nuxalk Value Systems**

In addition to pictures taken in museum storage visits, members of the Ancestral Governance Office also used already existing museum collections catalogues. While the information present in these catalogues is valuable, the ways that it is organized typically do not align with Nuxalk understandings of why their treasures are important. This discontinuity is made all the more apparent by conducting this work on Nuxalk territory. In this way, the digital database that staff are creating can also be brought into conversation with similar digital projects happening across heritage institutions. Many collaborative digital engagements between Indigenous communities and museum staff have revealed that this work requires a rethinking of how museums have traditionally documented and organized the data being used in these projects (Rowley 2013; Muntean, et. al. 2015; Glass 2015; Bohaker et. al. 2015; Hennessy et. al. 2013; Geismar & Mohns 2011; Lyons et. al. 2016). Scholars have sought to explain what these initiatives are working against – how certain values have persisted across time within these information systems – and how they continue to impact the postcolonial goals of the field. In seeking to understand how ideologies remain ingrained within museum databases, I draw on understandings of databases as *relational* – actively reflecting and obscuring connections, and databases as *material* – products of actions, negotiated between people and technologies to understand the legacies present within the museum collections databases with which this Nuxalk database started.

First, information studies scholars have described museum databases as networks of relations in order to understand how the actions and beliefs of individuals can act on these information hierarchies within museums, leaving remnants of values that continue to impact
current practice. Influenced by the broader field of actor network theory, this reframing argues that the study of relations is an essential way to approach anthropological questions and, by extension, museum work (Latour 2005; Law & Hassard 1999). In particular, Marilyn Strathern states that to truly understand society, people, or even things, require a fuller examination of the invisible networks of which they are composed (Strathern 1999). Mapping these networks challenges the assumption that entities, like databases or even belongings in museums, are limited by their physical forms (Bell 2017; Gell 1999). In the field of information studies, Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star have argued that an “infrastructural inversion” is required to challenge the normalization of database work, revealing the behind-the-scenes process of creation that results from relationships and also shows how this work is never innocent and always political (Bowker and Star 1999). This understanding of databases as relational has resulted in scholarship that seeks to illuminate these invisible networks and relationships.

When applied to museum databases, this relational perspective dissects these catalogues into networks of things and people, and shows how the ideologies of those with the power to construct these systems - curators, collectors and database creators - normalized certain fields and classifications as essential, and silenced alternative ways of ordering information. Anthropology museums, as institutions created of and for colonial powers, developed systems for cataloguing the materials they took from Indigenous communities with non-Indigenous audiences in mind (Bell 2012). At the turn of the twentieth century, anthropologists chose to collect materials that represented what they saw as authentic examples of “dying” cultures, which they regarded as permanent and static, rejecting objects that demonstrated the process of change and adaptation in Indigenous communities as inauthentic (Phillips 2011; Stocking 1988). Similar classification systems in museum databases reflected these understandings. Curators
often housed First Nation and Native American belongings in natural history or anthropology departments, while they categorized European settler material culture in history or art departments. This categorization supported an incorrect understanding of First Nations cultures as unchanging, passive and no-different from nature itself, while history and art exhibitions of settler culture emphasized innovation, success and progress. It also could be used as support for seeing Indigenous territory as unoccupied or unused, often referred to as terra nullius, “nobody’s land,” which justifies denying First Nations’ unrelinquishable rights to their land (Wolfe 2006).

Throughout literature on museum catalogues, scholars continually emphasize making visible the invisible relationships and ideologies present within databases. I believe this tendency is in part inherited from what Latour calls the “paradoxical presence of something at once invisible yet tangible” that inspires anthropological research questions (Latour 2005: 21). Mapping networks of relations in both actor-network and database theories relies on tracing the intangible connections between the tangible. In database research, this has resulted in questions about what is not clearly visible in the catalogue: which ideologies are influencing its creation, who is the source of the information entered, and why is some information included or excluded? In addition, this rhetoric around invisibility also comes from an understanding of how normative practices, such as how museums record and organizing information on objects, can remain unexamined. This is especially of interest for collections databases in museums because, while a museum’s collections are often celebrated as the most important part of the institution, the task of managing the information around collections has often been seen as menial or boring (Turner 2016). Collections cataloguers and their work have been underpaid, undervalued and understudied – hidden but important elements of museum work that must be revealed. Finally, scholars have pointed out that the structures of digital databases are literally invisible to the average user in that they are coded into their construction (Geismar & Mohns 2011). For these
reasons, discourses on invisibility have been influential in shaping current literature on museum anthropology databases.

While I agree that this framework is both helpful and necessary, this thesis shows that changing the location of this type of research fundamentally shifts these conversations. Although a relational understanding of museum objects and databases is relatively new to the field of anthropology, it is not a new or novel concept in Nuxalk epistemologies. Smayusta connect all Nuxalkmc to their ancestral territory, to their family lineage, and to their prerogatives to dance and display certain treasures to validate these connections (Hilland 2013; Mack 2006; McIlwraith 1992[1948]). Nuxalk treasures are important because of their deep relationships to the land and to the community. Relationships are always about people, and understanding Nuxalk treasures without Nuxalkmc at the center makes no sense, as Snxakila explains: “You can have all the masks in the world, but without the next generation there’s no more connection to the land, there’s no more culture, there’s nothing.” For Nuxalkmc, these relationships are not invisible, and working on this database on Nuxalk territory, in the control of Nuxalkmc, means that this perspective is never in question.

One of the primary collections databases Ancestral Governance Office staff are working with is from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. In her article analyzing the creation of this particular catalogue, museum anthropologist Candace Greene provides a compelling example of how the application of relational theory enriches our understanding of how databases can reflect scientific epistemologies. Founded by an act of Congress in 1846, the Smithsonian Institution is the oldest collecting institution in the United States. At the beginning, museum staff were very conscious of the institution’s professional significance in “a young nation seeking to build its scientific credibility” (Greene 2016: 149). This emphasis on scientific classification bled into the Anthropology Department catalogue, which lifted its first ledger
books used to record new objects entering the collection straight from the biology department, despite irrelevant fields such as “sex.” Collections catalogues privileged information that prioritized First Nations’ objects as “scientific specimens,” “data” or the “gift of a donor,” and silenced other meanings they may have had such as the belonging as a family heirloom or a holder of ceremonial rights and knowledge (Turner 2016; Greene 2016).

Ancestral Governance Office staff most often encountered these scientific epistemologies in the Smithsonian Institution’s catalogues through language. As Nununta added the cedar-woven coming of age cloak to the digital database one afternoon, she turned to me and pointed to a phrase in the Smithsonian Institution’s database: “Aquis. Source” (see Figure 3)\(^5\). “What the heck does this mean?” she asked. This inscrutable phrase stands for “Acquisition Source,” or the person or organization from which the museum received this particular object. As a former collections researcher, I am familiar with how helpful the term acquisition is in a museum context; it can refer to an individual, company or organization and it can be applied broadly to cases where objects transferred ownership through sale, gift, trade or bequest. But the use of this word here served as a reminder that this particular museum’s database was designed with an expert, staff or researcher audience in mind.

\(^5\) Although the coming of age cloak at the National Museum of the American Indian is classified as being of “Nuu-chah-nulth” origin, the Ancestral Governance Office staff contest this assessment. See Figure 4.
Figure 3: Coming of Age Cloak. National Museum of the American Indian, 2018.
Furthermore, the casual assumption of English as the primary language of museum catalogues reflects an understanding of these databases as meant for a certain audience. As Stanley effectively states: “the dominance of English on this territory is itself the product of a history of domination and exclusion” (2009:146). But in the Ancestral Governance Office, Nuxalk is the language that dominates the space, not English, and it is literally written on the walls in physical traces surrounding the very computer stations on which we worked. Halfway through my fieldwork, I looked back on my notes and realized that they were almost entirely filled up with jottings on how to pronounce Nuxalk words, or the difference between the glottal consonant sounds that aren’t present in English. Language revitalization is also of incredible importance to Nuxalkmc outside of the administrative offices. I spent one cloudy afternoon at the community college, helping to prepare a cookout to celebrate the students who had taken classes over the past year. Hands full of plates of potato salad and burgers and glasses of soda, I explained what I was working on to a small group of young women. “But how will you include language?” one of them asked immediately, starting a conversation about how helpful audio pronunciations of the Nuxalk words for the objects we were organizing would be to include in the database. These community members’ comments exemplify how creating this database on Nuxalk territory makes obvious the values present within the museum catalogues we were working from.

If a relational perspective on databases explains how values can become inscribed in them at their creation, then how do these values persist over time and why are Nuxalkmc still encountering them in the process of their work? In addition to understanding databases as relational, information studies scholars have also argued that the materiality of databases provides another method of explaining how certain value systems can remain present over time, despite changes in the field of museum anthropology at large. Whether collections catalogues are
physical or digital, their relationships to the material world impact their use and meaning. Media scholars have argued that the material components of technologies influence their use and meaning even as their physical elements are replaced with digital ones (Gitelman 2006; Kirshenbaum 2008). Databases, as a form of media, are no exception to this. Early museum collection ledger books and catalogue cards limited the space available to record information, necessitating choices over what should be included and what should not (Beltrame & Jungen 2013). In some cases, this meant ignoring or omitting potentially relevant contextual information about objects, in favor of others. For example, anthropologist Aaron Glass describes uncovering valuable information from George Hunt and Franz Boas’s field notes on a collection of Kwakw̱a’wakw objects in Berlin. While these notes recorded important knowledge such as the Kwak’wala words and family histories of certain objects, they were left out in the creation of the catalogue in favor of the museum’s understandings of value (Glass 2015).

Critical information studies scholar, Hannah Turner’s research on the digitization of the same Smithsonian catalogue that members of the Ancestral Governance Office are working with reveals how even the routine work of data entry can result in the persistence of “legacy data” that continues to perform settler colonial ways of knowing (Turner 2016:165). She relies on the work of sociologist, John Law, who describes how knowledge and relations between records can persist when they have a physicality to them, a theory he calls “material durability” (Law 2008). In museum collections catalogues, “practices of object naming and classification seem to “stick” to the current object records despite decades of postcolonial research and revision” (Turner 2016:170). For example, the cedar cloak that Snxakila’s sister wore for her coming of age ceremony is classified in the National Museum of the American Indian’s database as “Clothing/Garments, Outerware.” This descriptive categorization fails to capture the relational and ceremonial meanings that this regalia holds, and while many anthropologists and Indigenous
scholars have commented on this understanding, it is still not expressed in the database itself. In this way, the materiality of databases allows ideologies to persist long after the field of museum anthropology has committed itself to decolonial practices.

Through tracking traces of place-based knowledge present in Nuxalk territory and within Nuxalk treasures, the ideologies within museum collections catalogues become glaringly obvious. I argue that part of the reason museum anthropology literature has come to see certain value systems within collections catalogues as invisible comes back to where this work is being conducted, and who is in control. Creating this digital database of cultural heritage on Nuxalk territory, as part of a project directed and controlled by Nuxalkmc, sharply shows how the value systems of the creators and users of museum collections databases do not align with the community’s. This both illustrates the value of Indigenous-controlled projects such as this one and argues for the value of supporting similar initiatives in the future. In addition, this perspective was immeasurably helpful in informing how cultural workers in the Ancestral Governance Office would create a new digital database of these treasures that better reflected Nuxalk understandings and ways of knowing.
Chapter 3 Medicine to Heal the Nation: Prioritizing Wellness and Indigenous Resurgence in the Process of Creating a Nuxalk Digital Database

“And so, all the items in the museum, now, are essential to what we’re doing today. Because while we’re trying to return to our traditions, we understand that the traumas that we’ve faced: the four modern catastrophes: the small pox, the relocation to reserve, potlatch ban, residential schools, and all the nasty things that happened in between, that the thing that was taken from us most is our way of being, our culture, our identity. And so that is the ultimate medicine – the iixsa that will heal the nation.” –Snxakila (Clyde Tallio)

In this chapter, I discuss in detail the process of creating this digital database on Nuxalk territory. I argue that the very act of organizing their treasures into a database that respects Nuxalk ways of knowing can be seen as an act of healing and Indigenous resurgence. Indigenous resurgence means regenerating the ways that Indigenous peoples have lived by reframing the work of decolonization to be about restoring Indigenous nationhood. As described by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, it is land-focused and comprised of inward-facing, everyday acts of resistance – simply living “as we have always done” (Simpson 2017). For Ancestral Governance Office staff, Indigenous resurgence clearly aligns with their goals of supporting the Nuxalk Nation elected council and Stataltmc (hereditary leadership) in making decisions based on ancestral governance, and in using these protocols to protect and manage their territory. The Nuxalkmc working on this digital database project framed these goals in terms of individual and community health, looking after the wellbeing of present and future generations. First, I describe how scholarship around wellness in the larger field of heritage studies and Indigenous writings on resurgence can speak to each other and envision important implications for the relationships between museums and Indigenous peoples. Then, I describe the steps cultural workers are taking in creating this digital database. Importantly, it is the process of creating this database, rather than the final product that is meaningful in facilitating community engagement with the research the Nuxalkmc in the Ancestral Governance Office are organizing. I find that while ultimately both this project and collaborative database initiatives follow similar methods in working to
make space for Indigenous knowledge, their motivations are quite different and provide another example of how database made by Nuxalk, for Nuxalk is distinct. Returning to the example of the coming of age ceremony I attended in October of 2017, I show how the process of creating this database supports Nuxalk understandings of wellness, and close with reflections on what this might mean for the future of museum anthropology.

**Working Towards Iixsa (Our Medicine): Strategies in Database Creation**

“**I think that’s it. If we think of anything else, we can add it.”** Breathing in deeply with relief, I turn off the voice recorder on my phone. I’ve just finished interviewing my friend, Snxakila, and we’re both exhausted. Stepping out onto the porch for some air, I stare quietly out into the yard still feeling a lingering discomfort. Our interview was formal and a bit awkward – so different from the easy and casual conversations we’ve had over the past weeks. I bring this up, and Snxakila shrugs it off: “We’ve talked a lot. You already know what I mean.” Do I, I wonder? We drive with another friend down to the edge of the river that evening. Standing on the bank, a thin, cool fog hangs low over the water. So close to the water, the grass soft and spongy beneath our feet. We’ve lost sight of the reserve houses up by the road. And Snxakila starts telling stories. He talks about what the massive longhouses of Q’umk’uts would have looked like behind us on the bank, and then without pausing turns to the edge of the reserve and describes plans for the future Big House where Nuxalkmc will hold future potlatches, keep their cultural treasures and tell their teachings. And just like that I do know what he means - why the continuity of past to present to future matters and how the database we have been working on fits into a larger understanding of culture as medicine to restore Nuxalk ways of living as a people.

The research and digital database work Stewardship Office staff as a whole are engaged in is directly aligned with supporting the continued existence and enrichment of the Nuxalk Nation. Created out of a need to protect their unrelinquishable territory rights from the
encroachment of resource extracting capitalist and Canadian government organizations, their focus has grown to include furthering Nuxalk independence and sovereignty through the Ancestral Governance Office. Indigenous scholars describe this inward focus on restoring community and individual, place-based, relational ways of existing as Indigenous resurgence (Alfred 2009; Corntassel 2012; Simpson 2011). Importantly, these practices include the simple, everyday acts of living as an Indigenous person both individually and communally, which are meaningful counters to settler colonial systems (Snelgrove, et. al. 2014; Simpson 2017). They also are understood as vital to the present and future wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, as “when considering how colonization systematically deprives us of our experiences and confidence as Indigenous peoples, the linkages between colonialism, cultural harm, and the disintegration of community health and well-being become clearer.” (Snelgrove et. al. 2014:88)

Recently, researchers in archival and museum studies have also begun to examine the relationship their work with Indigenous communities has to Indigenous understandings of wellbeing. They have drawn on studies showing the connections between health and cultural continuity, collective and individual cultural identity and residual cultural stress from historical, colonial trauma (Brave Heart et. al. 2011; Brown, et. al. 2017; Chandler and Proulx 2006; Hallett et. al. 2007; Royal Commission 2006; Shannon 2018). Scholars have described the diverse ways objects of cultural heritage can be mobilized to aid in healing, such as through touch and affective experiences with collections, as therapy in community-based archaeological practices, through self-representation and colonial truth-telling in exhibitions, and in confronting past trauma in archival documents (Chatterjee and Noble 2009, Shaepe et. al. 2017, Lonetree 2012, Murphy 2011). This focus on wellbeing also comes out of years of community-based work and listening to how Indigenous peoples understand the value of connecting to their histories.
The process of creating a digital database of Nuxalk treasures acts as a form of Indigenous resurgence, and supports Nuxalk understandings of wellbeing. As scholars have argued, one powerful expression of Indigenous resurgence occurs through establishing control and ownership over their own knowledge, particularly through digital data management (McMahon et. al. 2015). For members of the Ancestral Governance Office, this work is a forward-facing endeavour, always focused on and inspired by making a better future for the next generation of Nuxalkmc. Nununta described the importance of this work explicitly: “We need to heal. We need to heal spiritually. We need to heal physically. We need to heal before we can move forward.” This tradition of looking ahead is a way of thinking Nuxalkmc call “putl’alt” – for those not yet born. Understanding the process of creating a digital database in this context reinforces the continuity of Nuxalk culture and holds no separation between the people who experienced these tragedies and those who have yet to be born, no separation between the longhouses of Q’umk’uts and the future Big House of Bella Coola.

Specifically, I want to return to the example of the coming of age ceremony that happened in October of 2017 at the tail end of my fieldwork. This ceremony is a meaningful example of how Nuxalkmc are using knowledge about their treasures in museums to support the present and future wellbeing of young women in their community. A coming of age ceremony is hosted by a family’s stal’tm (hereditary leader) and involves enormous preparation to create the regalia the young women will wear, including a cedar-woven cloak and hat, both dyed black and decorated with dentalium shells, and a button blanket with her family’s crest. Families also present their inherited Smayusta (first stories) in the form of songs and dances, which involve masks, rattle, and other regalia. As a ceremony which uplifts and teaches young girls how to live as Nuxalk women, this event is a powerful example of Indigenous resurgence. As Snxakila described, thinking about his own sister’s coming of age:
There are four songs that are used in connection with our ceremony. All of these songs have roots – the various women within our nation that we hold up and idolize as leaders, as matriarchs of our people. Those songs are used to invoke that power. That’s the feeling that we’re trying to get, that we’re trying to instill into the young girl that is coming of age.

It is the activation of knowledge that comes from the process of creating this digital database that is so essential, not the database itself. I describe how strategies to include Nuxalk ways of knowing within this process of creating this database – following protocol, recognizing the authority of Nuxalk experts and knowledge keepers, and incorporating Nuxalk language use – are framed to support and also contribute to Indigenous resurgence and wellbeing.

The people working in the Ancestral Governance Office prioritize following Nuxalk protocol in creating the database. Heiltsuk Librarian Kimberly Lawson speaks to the vital importance of protocol in the management of First Nations materials and information within archives and museums, and how their care is intimately tied to Indigenous ways of knowing (Lawson 2004). For staff, control over this digital database provided an opportunity to research and revitalize the ways that Nuxalk knowledge has been respected. Practically, this meant recognizing that the treasures we were entering into the database belonged to specific families. Traditionally, many of these treasures would have been kept in a family’s treasure box and only brought out and shown at potlatches or for special ceremonies, like a coming of age. What would it mean to put images of these treasures in an online database, accessible for the entire Nuxalk community to see? Does this follow ancestral protocol? As others have argued, the assumed values of public access and openness when it comes to cultural heritage are not universal (Christen 2012; Morphy 2015). Like Kimberly Christen observed in writing about Indigenous communities working with the Mukurtu database platform, we recognized the “ethical systems of relation and action” which were contained within each object added into the database (2012: 36).
In our case, recognizing these relationships meant acknowledging the rights families maintained over these treasures. Snxakila described this slow process in detail:

“When we go to a museum, we photograph everything. We go through the research. We find out it’s connected to a particular family. Then I will go to the staltmc, to the eldest sibling alive who own that treasure and I’ll go talk to them…It brings the family together and makes them feel good to be able to bring out a treasure.”

The four members of the Ancestral Governance Office have started meeting regularly with the Stataltmc as part of an effort to both respect protocol but also to try to share the work they are doing on the database with the wider community. While the database is still in process, it is not accessible to all Nuxalkmc yet. Nununta talked about the struggle to balance accessibility and wanting to honor Nuxalk understandings of knowledge: “We need a plan to give all the information out as much as we can. How do we do it? Because we can’t just give it out because those are family items, family articles.” Following protocol reinforces ancestral governance; it affirms the continuation of Nuxalk authority, rights and responsibilities that are essential to Indigenous resurgence. But it also comes with these challenges.
Creating the digital database also allows for an opportunity to recognize the knowledge and expertise of Nuxalkmc within the nation. As I have mentioned, the Cedar Box App platform
does not allow many opportunities for customization. The database provides very generalized fields, as seen in this example of the cedar-woven coming of age cloak (see Figure 4), and as a result the “Summary” field is one of the most-used categories. One innovative change involves including tags for each individual who has seen a treasure in person, usually as part of the museum visits organized from 2013-2015. Sharing the experiences of encountering these treasures became an important way of recognizing the expertise already present among Nuxalkme. In the case of the record we created for the cedar-woven coming of age cloak, we eventually decided to include Nununta’s name as one of these tags. Despite never seeing it in person, Nununta and several other women recreated the coming of age cloak based on the images in this database for Snxakila’s sister to wear during her coming of age ceremony this past fall. “Tagging” them recognizes their knowledge as cedar weavers and provides a space to record this knowledge for future ceremonies. It also creates relational connections to other records. As I entered information from museum collections’ catalogues into the Nuxalk database, I would also review these records with either Snxakila or Nununta. When we knew which family possessed the Smayusta to certain treasures we would add these stories to the records. Recognizing Nuxalk knowledge in this way also encourages contextualizing the information from museum collections’ catalogues. As mentioned earlier, this practice also helps answer the common question of how these treasures have left Nuxalk territory. Collectors such as James Swan or Iver Fougner are also given tags, and their relationship in removing these treasures from Nuxalk territory is explained rather than hidden under an abbreviation such as “Aquis. Source.”

Many digital databases created in collaboration between museum staff and community members also seek to incorporate Indigenous knowledge by challenging the assumed authority of the institutional voice of these catalogues (Hennessy, et. al. 2013; Rowley 2013; Bohawker et. al 2014; Christen 2011). For example, record-makers using the Great Lakes Research Alliance for
the study of Aboriginal Art and Culture’s website are asked to “provide their reasons for attributing undocumented pieces to particular groups and time periods, bringing to the surface rather than omitting or glossing over the gaps in information and the contradictory opinions that surround many attributions in museum records” (Bohaker et. al. 2015:46). The Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) also uses a similar platform to allow members to speak back to collections, with the added goal of supporting “the development of new relationships” between collaborators (Rowley 2013: 32). As others have pointed out, institutions are hesitant about opening themselves and their records up to edit and critique, which remains a barrier to these changes (Hennessey 2013; Rowley 2013;). Contextualizing where information is coming from in digital databases does decenter the authority of museums, but more importantly in our case it serves to create a space where Nuxalk knowledge is valued, prioritized, and kept in line with ancestral protocols for future generations to use and learn from.

Another strategy museum anthropology scholars have used to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into museum catalogues has come from questioning English as the default language of these projects. These attempts have a wide range of methods; the Sq’éwlets website project uses words in the Halq’emeylem language, such as a:wkw (belongings), to help identify corresponding terms in English to communicate Sq’éwlets and Sto:lo understandings (Lyons et. al. 2016). In their work, anthropologist Haidy Geismar and independent scholar William Mohns explain that instead of defaulting to English, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s revised collections catalogue is designed to be completely trilingual – in English, French and Bislama. In deciding to push for a multi-lingual catalogue, Geismar and Mohns describe how the design team wanted to “open the field of choice to the user and accommodate a multiplicity of privileged forms” and meanings to its diverse users (Geismar & Mohns 2011:S144). Users can enter search terms in any of the three languages to find what they are looking for. This flexibility nevertheless remains
plagued with tensions, as entering terminologies into the database to be searched necessitates “a
privileging of some spellings over others, of the national languages over endemic ones, of the
written over the oral” (Geismar & Mohns 2011:S143).

Incorporating Nuxalk language into each record of the database became another way to
support Indigenous resurgence through language revitalization. In Bella Coola, as in other places
as Jennifer Carpenter, et. al. point out, the legacies of the residential school system have left
many Nuxalk speakers unable to use their language, either because of lack of knowledge or
feelings of distress or shame (2016). Recovering this knowledge is considered essential for
celebrating and reviving Nuxalk culture. When speaking Nuxalk, Snxakila explains, “You’re
bringing your heart, your mind, it completely becomes your authentic self.” Including Nuxalk
words in the digital database is important to everyone. Most of the records are still in English,
which is the primary language spoken in the valley, but the titles of each treasure are given in
Nuxalk words. The database also uses Nuxalk words to organize these treasures into
relationships with each other. For example, at the coming of age ceremony a mask was brought
out to tell the Smayusta of the undersea god, Q’umukwa. In the digital database, this mask is
tagged as a sisawk\(^6\) privilege, connecting it to other masks whose rights to dance are also passed
down through families (Kramer 2009; McIlwraith 1992[1948]; Boas 1898). One hope for the
future would be to include an audio file attached to each record so that users unfamiliar with the
language will be able to hear how to pronounce each object. In this way, the database could also
be an active resource for preserving and teaching the Nuxalk language to future generations.

In addition to including Indigenous languages, researchers are also beginning to question
why affective language has traditionally been excluded from museum collections records.

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\(^6\) Sisawk and Kusyut are two societies within Nuxalk culture which hold legal protocols and specific rights, which
includes the rights to dance certain masks.
Museum anthropologists Cara Krmpotich and Alexander Somerville argue that the absence of these emotional connections to objects, particularly in an Indigenous context, not only limits our understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of objects, but also risks compounding the erasure of originating community members from the interpretation of their heritage (2016). The emotional connection to Nuxalk treasures is easily apparent in the process of creating this database, and as I have shown even images of these treasures can generate powerful feelings. When I asked about the difference between digital images of Nuxalk treasures and the physical objects themselves, Snxakila explained by described his experience visiting museum collections with Nuxalkmc:

You even take people to MOA to show them around and some didn’t even know that all that stuff existed. And then when you tell them it’s from their family, you know, they become overwhelmed. Some become emotional. Some have great, deep connection. Some get inspiration. And some get angry, that they didn’t get to know this knowledge themselves.

It is difficult and expensive for community members to travel to museums to visit their treasures in storage, and few Nuxalkmc are able to do so on their own. While members of the Ancestral Governance Office have used the process of creating this digital database to support the wellbeing of the entire nation, they also know that digital images are not enough. Having the images, just as having the database, do not support Indigenous resurgence alone. It requires the hard work of individuals to incorporate this knowledge back into community life. This is why real repatriation, not just ‘digital return,’ is still valued by staff in this office, and by many Nuxalkmc in Bella Coola. It is also why the recreation of treasures like the coming of age cloak and the revitalization of cultural ceremonies are so meaningful.

The Nuxalk-controlled design of this database means that the process of creating it can follow the future-oriented goals of the nation – looking out for the wellbeing of the next generation of Nuxalkmc. But while this focus is valuable and shapes the decisions around
database design and accessibility, it also reveals how revitalizing cultural traditions and knowledge puts significant stress and burden onto the researchers involved. For example, taking care to follow protocols in regards to accessibility means that the database is only currently accessible to Ancestral Governance Office staff, putting them in the uncomfortable position of being gatekeepers of cultural knowledge. This puts pressure on the cultural workers in the office to facilitate access to this information, because it is so central to the nation’s wellbeing. It is draining because it is constant, as Nununta explains: “When the day’s over it doesn’t end. From the time we get up to the time we go to bed, we’re still doing the work.” In planning for the coming of age ceremony, I witnessed Snxakila spend over four hours on the phone with various community members – on a Friday evening, well after work hours were over, not to mention the flurry of activity over the weeks before the coming of age ceremony happened: making the cedar-woven cape and all the regalia, the button blanket, planning and practicing the songs and dances, including bringing out the Q’umukwa mask, and creating a monumental screen illustrating the Smayusta relating to the undersea god that would hide and protect the performers during the ceremony. The emotional labor undertaken by people who care deeply about the future and wellbeing of their communities is not talked about enough in heritage projects, and needs to be accounted for in planning processes.
Conclusion: For the Putl’alt. For Those not yet Born

“Nuxalkmc have a tradition of looking ahead. It is a way of thinking called putl’alt which means ‘for those not yet born.’”—Posted by Nuxalk Radio on Twitter, Friday September 13, 2017

“Why do we do coming of age? Why is this important? We want to make sure that she grows up in a good way, that she’s safe, that she cares for herself. So that way, when she’s ready to be a life giver – or just be who she is as a young Nuxalk woman – she’s got all the tools she needs on her path that she’s going to walk, the path she’s going to choose in life.” –Snxakila (Clyde Tallio)

I began this thesis by asking what makes the process of creating this digital database similar and different from digital databases that are made in collaboration with museums, universities or other heritage institutions. In other words, what new provocations do Indigenous-controlled projects, following Indigenous protocol and conducted on Indigenous land, generate?

I have demonstrated the importance of digital databases of cultural heritage that are entirely controlled and aligned with First Nations priorities. Working on Nuxalk territory reveals how traces of Indigenous knowledge and settler colonial histories on the land make non-Indigenous
values embedded within traditional museum collections’ catalogues obvious. The process of making this database also contributes to Indigenous resurgence and Nuxalk understandings of wellbeing. Finally, focusing on process over product shows how the value of this work lies not in the actual database itself, but in the enactment of this knowledge. Snxakila’s sister’s coming of age ceremony both celebrated and validated the importance of Nuxalk knowledge and ways of living, and looks forward to create a better future for those not yet born on Nuxalk territory.

What I have found in this project is not so much a simple comparison of how collaborative and Indigenous-controlled initiatives are different, but rather a challenge for the future of museum practice. I believe the connection of objects to ancestral governance and sovereignty requires rethinking the role of museums in supporting Indigenous resurgence. There can be a danger to collaborative museum work with First Nations that mistakes the purpose of these relationships as product-centered; relationships with Indigenous peoples create better exhibits, create better programs, create better products to support the missions of heritage institutions. What would museum anthropology look like if it fully committed to the radical and decolonizing goals of Indigenous communities? How would the museum look in ten, twenty, thirty years if it aligned itself with the political, anti-capitalist goals of Indigenous resurgence? The Nuxalkmc have shown me that this boundless, future-facing way of thinking can powerfully change the present. I am hopeful that this orientation will contribute to a field of museum anthropology of which future generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike will be proud.
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