

**Pedagogical Partnership: Autoethnography and the Creation of Repatriation Claims**

by

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Pedagogical Partnership: Autoethnography and the Creation of Repatriation Claims

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the degree of Master of Arts

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**Abstract:**

Repatriation is the act of returning tangible and intangible cultural heritage from museum collections back into the care of the Indigenous Peoples who created them. However, the process of claiming heritage items held in museums is not always simple. Instead, disagreements between Indigenous Peoples and museums about the timeline and proof provided for repatriations can lead to the creation and submission of a repatriation claim becoming a complex and tense effort.

This thesis examines a case study of repatriation claims made by the Gitxaala Nation to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), highlighting points of friction that occurred during the process. In doing so, it explores inter-community collaborations, and the sharing of authority and power within the repatriation claims process.

Incorporating the Author's work as a member of the Gitxaala Nation's repatriation research team, alongside other scholarly works that detail models of Indigenous Peoples' and Museums' engagements and methodologies for collaboration, this thesis discusses the neo-colonial elements of the processes governing repatriation claims-making between a Canadian First Nation and a United States Museum. This thesis argues that understanding repatriation claims as a form of autoethnography can guide the development of an Indigenized repatriation protocol in museums and thus offer an alternative to the contemporary protocol used in the process of repatriation.

**Lay Summary:**

Repatriation is the act of returning heritage items from museum collections back to the Indigenous Peoples who created them. However, returning heritage is not always a simple process. Disagreements around key points of repatriations can lead to tensions between Indigenous communities and museums. This thesis is a case study of an assertion of ownership made by the Gitxaala Nation to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) regarding items of Gitxaala heritage. It discusses the role of collaboration and concepts of authority within repatriation claims to discuss how the repatriation process can be made to be more equitable. This thesis argues that repatriation claims are a way for Indigenous Peoples to express their desires for the future of their heritage, and that Indigenous community control over the process is needed to guide the development of new ways of thinking about repatriation.

**Preface:**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Aaron LaMaskin.

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## **Introduction**

In the fall of 2022, I came to the UBC Anthropology department to begin my MA studies. I arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia from Denver, Colorado optimistic and eager to learn about the process of collaboration between Indigenous communities and museums, whether through the medium of exhibition design, collections-based consultation, or the work of repatriation. My previous research and interests had led me to believe that Indigenous communities, museums, and anthropologists at large held a shared goal: to decenter the longstanding institutional power of “the Museum” and to replace it with the rightful authority of what I understood as “Indigenous Knowledge.”

Soon after my arrival, I was introduced to the Gitxaala repatriation project through a call for an intern put out by Gitxaala’s Culture and Language Department. I enthusiastically applied, and after several Zoom call interviews, I was accepted to begin working with the team. With this position, I was presented with the chance to work toward righting the injustice of museums’ contemporary holding of cultural heritage, and most importantly, I was being called upon to engage in community-directed research!

However, it was not to be so easy as I had naively assumed. The work that I undertook as a part of the Gitxaala Repatriation team was eye opening for me. I experienced firsthand the challenges and difficulties for Indigenous Peoples in researching and submitting a repatriation claim under United States law. While there is much discussion within museum anthropology committed to unpacking the need for repatriation, and discussing the ways in which Indigenous Peoples can reconnect with their heritage and the treasures created in their communities’ past, there are still significant barriers and obstacles that arise when requests for cultural heritage to be returned are made.

This thesis is simultaneously two things. Primarily, it is a case study of the process of making repatriation claims, and a discussion of the immense work that goes into returning just a small portion of Indigenous communities' cultural heritage home. Secondly, it is an attempt to bring attention to the fact that while the need for repatriation has been voiced within the museum world, there are barriers in place that remain as legacies of the colonial past, and which left unchecked constitute a portion of the neocolonial present. One such barrier is the continued authority of most museums to approve or disprove of repatriation claims, continuing the structures of authority that enabled museums' taking of Indigenous cultural heritage in the first place. Furthermore, repatriation protocols continue to be generated from within Euro-Western legal frameworks.

By highlighting aspects of my work with the Gitxaala Nation and drawing on this case study of specific repatriation research and claims, I dissect the repatriation claims process to reveal the logics through which the approval of repatriation claims operates within museums. These logics force Indigenous communities' claims to their heritage held in museums to be made through a framework based in Euro-Western modes of thinking, favoring strict categorizations and justifications for the return of cultural heritage, as opposed to deriving justifications through Indigenous communities' own laws, ontologies, and relationships to their heritage. By exposing these logics, I address the enduring legacy of power imbalances between Indigenous Nations and museums and look toward the future of an indigenized repatriation protocol.

## **Project Background**

For the period of one year, I worked as a member of the Gitxaala Nation's repatriation research team and as a student researcher interested in learning about the process of submitting a repatriation claim. My engagement with the repatriation research team consisted of directly working with the Gitxaala Nation's Culture and Language Department as first a paid member of, and then an unpaid volunteer for, the repatriation research team.

As a member of the team and as a researcher, my approach to engagement with my work consisted of what Menzies and Butler have described as "service learning." This approach was adopted by Menzies and Butler to describe students' field school research undertaken with the Gitxaala Nation (Menzies and Butler 2011), where students placed a dual emphasis on both services provided to the community, as well as on the product of a student's research itself. This is in line with Menzies and Butler's praxis for research with and for the Gitxaala Nation, which has focused on renegotiating the relationship between university research and the Gitxaala Nation (Menzies 2004, 2013, Menzies and Butler 2019). I was guided to adopt this approach from the start of my project thanks to the mentorship of Charles Menzies and Caroline Butler. As a member of the Gitxaala Nation, professor of anthropology, and member of my thesis committee, Menzies' substantial work to create an equitable research relationship between the Gitxaala Nation and the UBC Anthropology department foregrounded the development of my thesis research, and his support of my project influenced my work with the Gitxaala Nation under Butler, a former doctoral student and longtime research collaborator of his. Butler was one of the Gitxaala Nation's repatriation research team co-leaders at the time of my involvement.

Butler's leadership and her belief in the concept of service learning meant that I was directed to participate primarily in the community-directed work of the Gitxaala repatriation

project, and only secondarily as a student committed to my own learning about the process of repatriation and provenance research. As such, the research products produced throughout my MA work contribute first and foremost to the Gitxaala Nation's goals of reconnecting with their heritage held in museums, and in doing so help to create and solidify an appropriate research partnership between myself as a non-Indigenous scholar and the Gitxaala Nation.

In my role researching and working to return museum held items for the Gitxaala repatriation team, I collaborated with the team's two non-Indigenous archivists to conduct the provenance research necessary to pursue the return of Gitxaala heritage. Our research focused on producing detailed lists of items held by North American museums, both those known to be from Gitxaala as well as those listed only as North American, Tsimshian<sup>1</sup>, or from British Columbia. As a part of this process, we were responsible for detailing the ways in which items not known by museums to be from Gitxaala could be attributed to the Nation, and for presenting these links to the research team's leadership.

The research team was in turn focused on the priorities of the Gitxaala Nation's hereditary and elected leadership, negotiated between the two bodies of Gitxaala Nation authority, and communicated to the archivists and me through the research team's leadership. As both a student and a researcher, I took active interest in understanding and witnessing the inner workings of repatriation research and claims-making, with the explicit objective of learning from my work within the Gitxaala team's process to produce my own work relating to research questions outside of the scope of the Gitxaala Nation's repatriation research team.

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<sup>1</sup> The Gitxaala Nation has historically been classified as Coast Tsimshian along with thirteen other coastal nations, as well as the Nisga'a and Gitksan, as 'Tsimshian' by way of linguistic and cultural similarities between the nations (Menzies 2016, 14-5).

## Research Questions

The research questions for my thesis grew from and were grounded in my work and collaboration with the Gitxaala Nation's repatriation research team, and from my desire to explore the theoretical implications of the process of conducting repatriation research for the Gitxaala Nation. My goal was to conduct research aimed at understanding how the Gitxaala Nation engaged with repatriation, and to document and discuss the structures of power involved in repatriation research. Thus, my research questions are as follows:

1. What are the effects of viewing repatriation processually, rather than as a one-time event?
2. How might dissecting the Euro-western concept of authority change the process of repatriation when a museum espouses a collaborative methodology?
3. How can museums address power imbalances present in repatriation practices?

These questions are informed theoretically by the work of anthropologists and heritage specialists James Clifford, Robin Boast, Bryony Onciul, Jennifer Shannon, Robin Gray, Jane Anderson, Sonya Atalay, and Audra Simpson, whose scholarship contributes to my understanding of the interplay between Indigenous and Euro-Western ontologies within the process of collaboration between museums and Indigenous Nations. Likewise, these authors have written about multiple case studies key to my understanding of the need for decolonization within repatriation practice and have critically reflected upon their experiences working *with* and *for* Indigenous communities. Apart from Sonya Atalay (Anishinaabe-Ojibwe), Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk), and Robin Gray (Ts'msyen) these scholars are non-Indigenous, yet each has brought to the table discussions and methods for indigenizing and decolonizing how Western institutions engage with Indigenous ways of thinking about and caring for cultural heritage.

Theoretically and pragmatically, they each aim to analyze the power structures present in contemporary Western institutions and ask critical questions regarding the intersections of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing.

## **Methods**

My methods reflected my dual role between my commitments to the Gitxaala Nation and to my MA thesis research. As a researcher for the Gitxaala Nation, my research involved attending meetings, developing a relationship with the staff of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), conducting provenance research and collections research, and engaging in outreach and relationship facilitation efforts.

My research consisted largely of active participation in meetings among the members of the Gitxaala Nation's Culture and Language department. These meetings typically occurred on Monday afternoons when the full research team met via Zoom to discuss the status of their work from the previous week, and to discuss upcoming projects and strategies. During these meetings I reported on the progress of my literature reviews and provenance research, sought support from culturally knowledgeable members of the team, and collaborated with my teammates to further our shared goals of bringing Gitxaala cultural heritage home.

In my role in the Gitxaala Nation team, I worked collaboratively with the two archivists present on the team to conduct provenance research on the NMAI's collection of Tsimshian cultural heritage. My work in this area culminated in the creation of a spreadsheet detailing the potential Gitxaala items in the NMAI collections. My teammates provided me with guidance regarding which metadata fields to use in categorizing the collection of the NMAI. Ultimately, I chose to include the fields: Description, Materials, Reasoning, Collection History, Initial Collector, Maker/Owner/User, Catalog Number, and URL. Although the team's research notes were made fully available to members of the Nation upon request, these categories were largely used only within the research team. Instead, presentations given to the Gitxaala Nation's leadership and the members of the Nation focused largely on images of the items themselves,

along with the reasoning behind the team's belief that each item might belong to the Gitxaala Nation.

Most of the metadata fields contained information drawn from the NMAI's collection search website and from work conducted with the NMAI reference archivist. The metadata field Reasoning, however, included a description of the criteria through which I chose to include each entry. In order to expand my understanding of culturally relevant contexts with respect to Gitxaala belongings, I collaborated with Dustin Johnson, a member of the Gitxaala Nation and one of the leaders of the research team, to produce a list of crests, motifs, materials, and designs especially relevant to the Nation. This informed my assessment of whether an item was potentially from Gitxaala. By adding a Reasoning field, I sought to add transparency to my research process, and provide community members documentation of my thinking.

As the team's efforts to research and repatriate heritage from the NMAI developed further, I attended meetings as a liaison between the Gitxaala Nation and the Museum. I consulted with the NMAI's staff regarding how to research the collections to produce formal repatriation claims in the format expected by the Museum. From these meetings, I worked alongside Johnson to develop a relationship between the Gitxaala Nation and the NMAI.

I was well positioned for the task of relationship development, as my previous advisor and mentor, Dr. Jennifer Shannon, had recently been hired by the NMAI to develop the Outreach and Engagement Planning Office (OaEP). While this office is not tasked directly with processing repatriation claims, Shannon and her team are responsible for working with Indigenous communities that reach out to the NMAI, providing resources to Indigenous communities, and facilitating collaboration between them and the NMAI. My history of working with Shannon allowed me to aid in developing a relationship between the OaEP team and the Gitxaala team.



This relationship in turn provided the Gitxaala team with facilitated access to archivists, researchers, and members of the repatriation team at the NMAI.

From my perspective as a MA researcher, my work was primarily directed at access to the inner workings of repatriation research and claims-making, with the explicit objective of learning from my work within the Gitxaala team's process to answer my research questions. My methods in this role primarily involved using participant observation during my research activities for the Gitxaala Nation outlined above, paying close attention to the dynamics between museum staff and Gitxaala Nation repatriation team, as well as the dynamics within the Gitxaala team. Because of this, my participant observation consisted primarily of attending meetings and taking notes, documenting the developing relationship between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation, and focusing on how the NMAI's legislated process of repatriation research and claims interacted with Gitxaala protocol and law.

This process remained true to the practice of participant observation; I was an active participant in the daily work of the Gitxaala Nation repatriation team. I had specific duties, responsibilities, and tasks to complete, and was a full-fledged member of the research team. At the same time, I acted as an outside observer, taking notes not only on matters related directly to my capacity in the team, but also to the ways in which the team interacted with the museum staff, and the ways in which they interacted with the Gitxaala Nation's material cultural heritage.

This research was fully sanctioned and supported by the Gitxaala research team, and I worked closely with Butler and Johnson to define the direction that my project would take. Thus, my methods are in line with other community-based participatory research projects (e.g. Atalay and McCreary 2022, Siwallace et. al 2022). Further, I sought to, as Menzies states, "reframe our disciplinary discussion in ways that move beyond simply treating [Indigenous] communities as

data sources” (2013, 172). Instead of extractive engagement, my primary goal was to engage in research that would benefit the Gitxaala Nation, through both my research *for* the community, and my research *with* them.

## Research Output for the Gitxaala Nation

As a researcher for the Gitxaala Nation repatriation team, my initial research output was to produce a literature review concerning the forms and styles of Tsimshian<sup>2</sup> art. I was tasked to glean anything that would help the team to create a profile of what identified Gitxaala art versus Tsimshian art more broadly. In this capacity, I sought to find any attempts that earlier researchers had made in discussing the differences between art produced by different communities labelled as Tsimshian. Unfortunately, there was little to be found on the subject.

While Marius Barbeau did (himself, and through interpretation of William Beynon's work)<sup>3</sup> make note of totem poles in the Gitxaala community (Barbeau 1964, 469-472), the descriptions provided were short, and consisted only of a list of crests present on the different poles. This was ultimately unhelpful to Johnson, who knew the Gitxaala crests, and had already shared a list of them to me at the onset of my work. Outside of Barbeau's work, there was nothing to be found that discussed the difference between the style of Gitxaala-produced art and other art made in Tsimshian communities. Several sources did discuss Tsimshian art styles in the context of the Northwest Coast (e.g. Inverarity 1967, Stewart 1979, Carlson 1997, Holm 1991, McLennan and Duffek 2000), but none of these focused on inter-community differences, and sought largely to define and categorize these works of art by traditional art historical categories including their use of color, form, and motifs, among others.

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<sup>2</sup> As opposed to Ts'msyen, a more recent term referring specifically to the peoples of the Skeena River (Menzies 2016, 15)

<sup>3</sup> Marius Barbeau was a non-indigenous anthropologist known for conducting early and formative fieldwork along the British Columbia coast from 1914 to 1947. Barbeau's work was aided by William Beynon (Nisga'a), whose status as a hereditary leader allowed him access to cultural practices and information otherwise unlikely to have been available to him (Duff 1964; Winter 1984, 281).

Following from these findings, I was asked by the nation to shift my focus to developing another literature review. Instead of trying to differentiate Gitxaala art from the wider classification of Tsimshian, I instead focused on provenance research and learning about repatriation methodologies. I read case studies on consultations, collaborations, and repatriations between Indigenous nations and museums and quickly learned that there is a plethora of examples of recently completed repatriations (e.g. Jessiman 2011, Krmpotich and Peers 2013, Whittam 2015, Conaty 2015, Miller 2018, Peers 2018, Shannon 2019, Ayau 2020). However, these examples have primarily been conducted according to the museums' governing structures and protocols, rather than the laws and protocols of an Indigenous community who had initiated the return.

While some of these discussions of repatriation (e.g. Schaepe and T'xwelátse 2006, Schaepe and Champion 2007, Jisgang Nika Collison, Sdaahl K'awaas Lucy Bell, and Lou-ann Neel 2019, and Gray 2022) focus on the return process through an Indigenous ontology, they also touch on how communities should understand that the repatriation process is conducted firstly through Euro-western legal models, and only secondarily through Indigenous protocols and laws. These examples also showed that the process of requesting an item for repatriation is inevitably time consuming and places the burden of proving claims to provenance on the shoulders of members of originating communities.

Following closely after this second literature review, and cognizant of my preexisting relationship with Shannon, I began research on the collections of the NMAI. I compiled a spreadsheet detailing the items listed as "Tsimshian" in the NMAI collections and sorted them by their catalogue information (name of collector and collection location), by crests depicted, and by other criteria provided by Johnson. These criteria included whether the item contained

specific materials (e.g. Abalone or Haliotis shell), if it was a culturally relevant item (e.g. a fishhook demonstrating Gitxaala techniques of manufacture, or a piece of regalia), or another item that the community had identified a particular interest in and connection to (e.g. an item displaying a known Gitxaala specific crest, or one which appeared to have a similar form to a known Gitxaala item). At the same time, through my collaboration with Johnson, I also took note of items that displayed key crest combinations, indicating more specifically that they might be from lineages in Gitxaala. Given these disparate criteria, of the initial collection search results on the NMAI's digital database, of 989 items at the NMAI listed as Tsimshian, 113 items were identified that could potentially have originated within the Gitxaala community.

Of these, one stood out– item #11/1741 “War Helmet representing a Grizzly Bear” (Figure 1). Details available on the NMAI's online database listed the helmet as having been collected in British Columbia by US Navy Lieutenant George Thornton Emmons at an unknown date after 1870, and purchased from Emmons by the Museum of the American Indian (the NMAI's precursor institution) in 1922. No further details regarding the helmet were available online, however working alongside the NMAI reference archivist, we were able to connect this item to its original accession lot card (Figure 2). Handwriting in pen listed it as a “ceremonial” item, owned by what the accession card listed as the family “He:l.” This name stood out to the team, as although it is not explicitly a *family name* per se, it *is* a chiefly name associated strongly with the highest ranking of Gitxaala hereditary leadership (Menzies 2016, 39). Further, the card stated that it represented a Killer Whale, rather than a Grizzly Bear. After discussing this with Johnson and the rest of the Gitxaala team, we determined that it likely represented a hybrid of a Killer Whale and a Wolf, a known crest of He:l. Based on this determination, we added this war helmet to the list of items to be requested for repatriation from the NMAI.

## **Collaboration as Process, Repatriation as Processual**

### *Introduction*

Many scholarly publications have described the process of repatriation from an abstract point of view (e.g. Jones and Ousley 2008, Jacobs 2009, Crouch 2010, Hennesey 2010, Begay 2012, Duarte 2012, West Jr. 2012, Colwell 2015, Mitchell and Burelle 2016, Liljeblad 2017, Peers 2017, Wessells 2017, Breske 2018, Shannon 2018, Johnson 2020, Nash and Colwell 2020, Williams 2021, Fforde et al. 2022, Sievert 2022, Tümsmeyer 2022, Gibson et. al 2023). Other publications have described the effects of the return of objects (e.g. Jessiman 2011, Peers 2018, Shannon 2019, Ayau 2020,) or have presented theoretical paradigms regarding the collaboration between museums and Indigenous Nations during repatriations (e.g. Roy and Christal 2002, Lawson 2004, Hollinger et al. 2013, Weiss 2021). There are fewer examples of works that explore the collaborations and relationship development between museums and Indigenous Peoples (e.g. Matthews 2016, Onciul 2015, Leischner 2022, Meloche 2022, Krmpotich 2024). Given this, previous articulations of repatriation practice have tended to focus on the details of Indigenous Nations' claims to heritage held in museums and have provided a perspective on the process of requesting the repatriation of their heritage. Likewise, they focus upon those claims where the items have been returned. However, what has been largely left aside are case studies of the points of friction and conflict that arise when two ontologies are brought together within collaborative repatriation work. The resulting tensions present a need to re-examine the nature of repatriation claims, and ask us to focus on the ways in which the structures of authorization and authority within the process of collaboration itself can reify neocolonial dynamics. For that reason, in this thesis I aim to a) analyze the neocolonial power imbalances that persist within the process of making repatriation claims despite what is intended to be a collaborative framework,

and b) suggest ways museums and those working in repatriation within museums can learn from Indigenous peoples' articulations of their ontologies in order to diffuse these imbalances of power and produce successful repatriations that bring items home according to appropriate cultural protocols.

I am inspired by Onciul's model of "engagement zones" and Shannon's method of "tentative anthropology" that understand the repatriation process as an ongoing negotiation of power dynamics. Using their concepts which pragmatically discuss collaborative relations between Indigenous peoples and museums as shifting and complex, we can begin to discuss and change neocolonial power structures present in the United States' current legislated repatriation process. I highlight aspects of the case study of the Gitxaala-NMAI repatriation research and claims in order to show the need to apply Indigenous methodologies within repatriation practice. Further, I locate negotiations of power not only in the interactions between museums and Indigenous peoples, but also in the dynamics between museums as institutions and their staff, as well as among members of Indigenous nations. Ultimately, I conclude that collaborative actions and power sharing are possible only during the research and claims-making stages of the process.

### *Undertaking Collaboration*

As I finalized and presented my research into the collections of the NMAI, Johnson, Shannon, and I moved into planning and information gathering meetings regarding the process of repatriation. While – given the NMAIA's applicability only within the United States – the NMAI were not legally obligated to repatriate any items to the Gitxaala Nation, Shannon explained that the museum operated under a "spirit of the law" approach, which meant that the museum would consider repatriations to Indigenous peoples outside of those which the U.S. Federal government recognized. Within the "spirit of the law," Shannon explained that the NMAI's operating protocol

encompassed three distinct modes of return for the items that the team could request. The first is what the NMAI considered a “full repatriation.” This involves a legal deaccession of a given item or set of items from the museum’s collection, which – following the discussion and paperwork required under the U.S. National Museum of the American Indian Act<sup>4</sup> – would return the requested items home in roughly 10 years' time, to the ownership of the Gitxaala Nation in accordance with both Canadian and United States property laws. The second possibility is a “shared stewardship agreement.” This option would mean that items came home sooner, within a few years, but that ownership would be held jointly between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation. The third option is a “community loan.” This mode of return would allow the museum to send an item to the Gitxaala Nation to be used ceremonially but would require that the item be returned promptly upon the completion of its use in community.

Each of these options presented allowed for differing levels of community control over the items, inversely with the expected time that it would take to have the items returned. While the option to have an item fully repatriated would allow for the Gitxaala Nation to take full control over the returned item, it also represented the longest wait time for the return of the requested item. In contrast, the ceremonial loan would see the item returned nearly immediately for use within a ceremonial context, with the caveat that the item would be home for only a short time and would be accompanied by a member of the NMAI staff.

Johnson took a few days to discuss these options with the Gitxaala Elders and leadership. Afterwards he, Shannon, and I met to discuss the path forward. Johnson shared that of primary interest to the community was a full repatriation. Secondarily, the shared stewardship model was

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<sup>4</sup> 20 U.S.C. §80q (Public Law 101–185), as amended by the NMAI Act Amendment of 1996 (Public Law 104–278)



of interest. Both options allowed for the Nation to regain long term physical control over the items, an aspect of their return that was identified by Gitxaala Elders and leadership as crucial. The ceremonial loan, on the other hand, was identified as an option that was unlikely to be something the community was interested in. From this conversation, we began to plan exactly which items would be requested and to work on identifying a time to visit with the museum's collection in person.

Beginning in November of 2023, we planned for a Gitxaala delegation to travel to the NMAI museum exhibition space in Washington, DC and the cultural resource center in Suitland, MD (where the collections not on display are housed) to view, visit with, and further investigate the items we had preliminarily identified as belonging to their nation. The NMAI's Office of Outreach and Engagement Planning (OaEP) offered up to \$20,000 USD to reimburse the Gitxaala team for travel, lodging, and per diem costs. After discussion with the OaEP, noting scheduling constraints on the side of the NMAI, and allowing for adequate time for the Gitxaala Nation delegation personnel to be decided on, we concluded that a visit near the end of January 2024 should be planned. This timeframe was mutually agreed upon by the OaEP office and the Gitxaala Nation, and we began to communicate with the members of the NMAI repatriation department to organize a request for the many items with which we would be visiting. This visit would allow for members of the Gitxaala delegation to see all the items that we had identified as potentially being their community's heritage, and would allow the community to then decide which of these should be requested for repatriation.

As the details for the trip were being finalized some weeks later, the team met for one last pre-visit Zoom meeting with the NMAI staff. We reviewed our plans for the visit, and discussed whether there were any Indigenous-owned restaurants or shops that the Gitxaala team could visit

while in the area. The meeting then proceeded with Shannon asking Johnson if the Gitxaala team had any final requests that we wanted to have built into our schedule.

Johnson responded, asking, “when we visited with other museums, we were able to return home with an item. Can we bring home an item with us when we leave the NMAI?” This question was met with a tense pause, before Shannon responded that this was unlikely, and reminded us that between the queue and the waiting time for repatriation requests, it would be nearly 10 years before any items would return home under the full ownership of the Nation. She then reminded us that community loans and ceremonial loans were still options left on the table if we wanted items to return home more quickly. This reminder was followed with another tense pause, followed by Johnson’s answer that the community would not be satisfied with shared stewardship, and that having the items returned in the form of a ‘loan’ was not sufficient, and that a repatriation and full transfer of ownership would be the only way that the Gitxaala Nation would be satisfied. A few days later, the team was notified that the trip had been postponed by Johnson and the Gitxaala leadership, who had offered to reach out to Shannon and the OaEP some time in the future to plan a new trip to the NMAI.

### *Theories of Collaboration*

A focus on process rather than explicit outcome is exemplified in Shannon’s (2019) articulation of her approach to collaborative projects. In her article “Museum mantras, teachings from Indian country” Shannon writes that to her, collaboration is, “about shared authority, trust, and an openness to other ways of knowing” (31). She notes that her prioritization of shared authority means that her role in each collaboration is to listen, and to work to facilitate Indigenous communities’ goals. Within the context of our discussions, this was made evident

through her exploration of several avenues of return for the requested items, as well as her sourcing funding from the NMAI to pay for the Gitxaala delegation's trip.

Discussing her willingness to help the repatriation research and requests following one of the meetings, she and I discussed her understanding of the process as engaging in what she has called "tentative anthropology" (2019, 31). During our conversation, she reiterated what she had written, that, "the fact that the choice is out of [the museum's] hands is what matters" (31). Therefore, rather than accepting Johnson's refusal of a shared stewardship agreement or ceremonial loan as a failure of our collaboration, she reminded me that to her ensuring a working and respectful relationship – regardless of outcome – is a critical element of how she engages with Indigenous communities.

Put directly she writes, "in collaborative work with [Indigenous] communities, where the goal is the maintenance of an appropriate process or relationship, the opposite is true: failure is an option – it has to be. In fact, it is a crucial component to the success of the mission." (31). In practice, this meant that instead of pushing for a pathway of return that would allow the Gitxaala Nation to have their heritage returned the soonest, Shannon understood the root cause for Johnson's refusal. She recognized that to Johnson and Gitxaala, not accepting anything beyond a repatriation and full return of ownership was a way to advocate for Gitxaala's power within the collaboration, and a way to shift the balance of power between Gitxaala and the NMAI. This is largely due to Johnson's assertion that the only form of ownership that the Gitxaala Nation would accept would be the Nation's sole ownership, and that the museum's ownership of Gitxaala heritage in any capacity would not be recognized or agreeable to the Nation. Shannon's effort to work within these terms thereby shifts the balance of power within our collaboration, as previously the museum's release of heritage to the community could be sped up via their

retention of ownership of the item. Rather than accept the NMAI's ownership alongside a quicker return of the item, Johnson instead opted to push to secure sole ownership of the item for Gitxaala, and thus to concede the time it would take to limit the Museum's power over the item in question.

Heritage scholar Bryony Onciul has coined the term "engagement zones" (2015). These engagement zones, Onciul highlights, "are conceptual, physical and temporal spaces in which participants interact in an unpredictable process of power negotiations" (2015, 72). In doing so, engagement zones produce "tangible manifestations of power negotiations between the engagement zone participants, and the wider museums and communities they represent." (2015, 72) such as exhibitions, repatriations, or other products. Her work posits that there is no simple solution to the power dynamics in play between museums and Indigenous communities, and that commitment to moving beyond established power dynamics will require ongoing effort on the part of both museums and Indigenous peoples. This effort requires that museums open their modes of operation to Indigenous ontologies, and work to incorporate Indigenous ways of understanding and working with collections and exhibitions. At the same time, it also requires that Indigenous communities engage in the work of bringing their ontologies into museum spaces, and work with museums to co-create clear goals for their heritage.

We see the mechanics of this during the collaboration between the NMAI and Gitxaala. Viewing the planning meetings between Johnson, myself, and Shannon as an engagement zone, we see that Shannon acted as a figure of the NMAI's authority, but that she did so with attention to the power dynamics present between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation. Her commitment to working to equalize the field between herself and Johnson exemplifies her method of tentative anthropology and highlights the interplay of power dynamics that are central to Onciul's

engagement zones. Through her work towards community control over the process of repatriation, Shannon's method of tentative anthropology shows directly how community control allows for the type of renegotiation of power dynamics and representation proposed by Onciul. Within this case study, Shannon clearly attempts to foster "shared authority, trust, and an openness to other ways of knowing" (Shannon 2019, 31).

Applying this understanding of community control to the NMAI-Gitxaala collaboration, we can see that the return of the requested items was a shared goal of key importance. At the same time, through Shannon's work to promote the Gitxaala Nation's authority, our collaboration was opened to the potential for a long-term process of relationship development. However, while relationship development itself was prioritized by Shannon, the Gitxaala Nation's goal was to secure ownership and the return of their cultural heritage.

This disparity between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation's goals was evident in other aspects of the process of collaboration. The NMAI team's goal of sharing authority centered around facilitating access to their support structures. Whether that meant having a reference archivist work to research the NMAI collections alongside the team or offering to set up and present the collections digitally to Elders, the NMAI staff acted with the intention to support the Gitxaala repatriation committee's goals. This support was offered to the repatriation team not out of any obligation on the part of the NMAI, but instead because the members of the NMAI staff were committed to building a lasting collaborative relationship with the Gitxaala Nation, in which the NMAI's resources would be shared with the Gitxaala Nation.

However, as the Gitxaala Repatriation team's goal was to have cultural heritage identified and returned to the ownership of the community with as few bumps in the road as possible, this led to friction between the parties. While the NMAI's support was appreciated and the shared

resources were utilized gratefully, because the Gitxaala Nation's primary goal was not to enter a longstanding relationship with the museum, but instead to secure the return of the heritage items as quickly as possible, the NMAI's actions more closely represent the sharing of support for the research arm of the project than a true sharing of authority.

### *Protocols, Conflicts, and Authority*

The NMAI's desire to share authority during the process of repatriation research and claims-making is grounded in an understanding of the importance of and commitment to laying the groundwork for community-led processes. However, any sharing of authority is ultimately contingent on institutional structures like the NMAI's repatriation policy<sup>5</sup> and the NMAIA which allow for the ceding of authority, rather than on the NMAI's goodwill and openness to community input.

The NMAI staff's commitment to repatriation outside of the scope required under the law, coupled with Shannon's direct offering of resources and support, show a concrete intention to address the power dynamics between museums and Indigenous Peoples. This presents a method of rendering Indigenous collaborators more easily able to set the direction of the collaboration's efforts within the dynamics of the research and claims-making phase. However, throughout this process of negotiation of power dynamics, there were forms of power that remained out of scope, unable to be shared.

While Shannon and the NMAI staff were able to offer the Gitxaala team multiple avenues for the return of their heritage, Johnson made it clear that the Gitxaala Nation weren't interested

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<sup>5</sup> The NMAI Repatriation Policy can be found here: <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/repatriation>

in the processes of return that would have the items coming home as a part of a ‘loan’ such as a community loan or a ceremonial loan. This is in no small part due to the fact that a loan would posit that the museum retained the ownership of these items, and thus would not fully return the items to the ownership and control of the Gitxaala Nation. At the same time, the non-loan pathway conflicted with the sense of urgency and desired immediacy that the Gitxaala team felt was critical to the success of the project. This urgency was driven by the Gitxaala Nation’s desire to see their heritage returned as soon as possible, so that the youngest generation could be taught by their Elders the importance of these items.

While both the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation shared the end goal of having the items of the Gitxaala Nation’s cultural heritage returned, each team’s process of how to reach this goal reflect a difference in the finer points of their means to achieve it. While the NMAI as an institution was not mandated by law to return items to the Gitxaala Nation, the NMAI team expressed that through working within “the spirit of the law”, rather than its explicit rulings, they were able to work with the Gitxaala Nation to return their heritage. Likewise, while the NMAI was committed to sharing authority, and to fostering the Gitxaala team’s leadership within the collaboration, both U.S. law and the NMAI’s internal bureaucratic process prevented the NMAI staff from fully taking a step back from their position of power.

We see this represented clearly when Johnson asked if the Gitxaala delegation could return home with an item from their visit. While in the Canadian context, this question might have been met with a ‘yes’<sup>6</sup>, the NMAIA and the NMAI’s own repatriation protocols specify a

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<sup>6</sup> This is due to the lack of an umbrella Canadian repatriation law like NAGPRA or the NMAIA. Instead, Canadian museums operate on a case-by-case basis for repatriations, often guided by their own individual repatriation policies.

distinct mode of approval for the deaccession and release of anything held in the NMAI collections. Thus, despite Shannon and the NMAI's desires to see the Gitxaala Nation reunited with their heritage on their traditional territory, and Shannon's explicit desires to cede authority to the Gitxaala research team in the process of repatriation, she was unable to fully do so in the context of an action that would directly infringe on the protocols of engagement that the NMAIA and the NMAI repatriation protocol had set.

The inability to cede control of the process rests in the NMAI staff's legal restriction to the NMAIA and the NMAI's own protocol, as these protocols are legislated by the federal government and not something that the NMAI staff can change, nor can they go against them. Instead, the NMAI's institutional repatriation protocol states that the, "...Board of Trustees, established by the NMAI Act, has the sole authority, subject to the general policies of the Board of Regents, to... lend, exchange, sell, or otherwise dispose of any part of the collections of the NMAI" (NMAI Repatriation Policy Sec. I). This means that the authority to approve a repatriation claim rests with the Board of Trustees as granted to them by the U.S. Government. Thus, the Board of Trustees' authority cannot be delegated to, or shared with, any Indigenous Nation that is requesting a repatriation without undergoing an explicit amendment to U.S. federal law.

Because of this, there exists a conflict between the NMAI's protocols and the praxis of the staff of the institution. While staff show a clear desire to share authority, and to work collaboratively, other aspects of the Museum's governance and protocols do not allow for this to be fully realized. This in turn shows that while the NMAI staff and researchers are committed to making the process of return more equitable, the museum itself as an institution retains an opaque and hierarchical model for the actual approval of a repatriation claim. This can be seen



further through the ways in which a repatriation claim is structured, and the criteria that Indigenous Nations must adhere to in order to have their heritage returned to them, as described below.

### *Claims-making, Definitions and Authority*

In the case of a repatriation of an item from a federally-funded United States Institution<sup>7</sup> a request must classify the requested items into one or more of five categories. These categories are: 1. Human Remains, 2. Funerary Objects, 3. Sacred Objects, 4. Objects of Cultural Patrimony, and 5. Objects Acquired Illegally. These categories are further contingent on the NMAI's agreement that a requested item shows "Cultural Affiliation" defined as, "a relationship of shared group identity that can be reasonably traced historically or prehistorically between a present-day Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization and identifiable earlier group" (NMAI Repatriation Protocol Sec. II B). Further, the claim must be made by either: 1. A Lineal Descendant, 2. An Indian Tribe, 3. A Native Hawaiian, or 4. A Native Hawaiian Organization (NMAI Repatriation Protocol Sec. II C). In practice, structuring the Gitxaala team's claims into these categories was difficult, especially given that the Gitxaala community's understanding of what these criteria meant differed from the NMAI's conception of the same. For each of the five categories, the research team had to carefully navigate between the NMAI's intent for the category, and the Gitxaala Nation's understanding of the same type of categorization.

The NMAI requires that the burden of proof for these categories lies with the person or group claiming an item such that, "To meet this burden, the available evidence must be sufficient to establish a reasonable basis for believing the materials in question are eligible for repatriation

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<sup>7</sup> Federally funded US institutions are subject to NAGPRA, apart from the NMAI which is subject to the NMAIA.

and that the claimant is a lineal descendant or culturally affiliated with the materials under claim.” In some cases, however, this burden of proof may be constructed through reference to NMAI’s catalog and accession records. The protocol further stipulates that “Where the written record bearing on an issue is inconclusive or unreliable, the claimant may satisfy its burden of proof through evidence derived from oral tradition, folklore, linguistics, geography, descent, kinship, archaeology, anthropology, historical patterns of ownership and/or control, expert opinion, or other relevant information” (NMAI Repatriation Protocol Sec. II D).

The categories and protocols outlined allow for the mobilization of traditional knowledge towards the goal of repatriation. Because the administration of repatriation claims is conducted through a framework derived from Euro-Western understandings of property, rights, and the transfer of ownership, they ultimately rely on a standard of proof that is derived from Euro-western colonial law. From this, the NMAI regents reserve the right to approve or deny claims to any given item in their collection, predicated on their agreement that the claims made by Indigenous Nations meet the burden of proof that they themselves have set. This presents a problematic standard to meet, and one which presented the Gitxaala research team with difficulties. In articulating our point of view, the Gitxaala team worried that we would not be able to sufficiently explain the reasoning that each of the items was desired to return home, or that we would not be able to fit our requests into the categories required by the NMAIA and the NMAI’s repatriation protocol.

While the classification of items as Human Remains is at times straightforward,<sup>8</sup> and the NMAI did not have the remains of any Gitxaala ancestors in their collection, the classification of items as Funerary Objects was met with difficulties. Members of the Gitxaala research team repeatedly pointed to the fact that some of the items were taken from contexts nearby to village sites uninhabited at the time and postulated that the lack of records surrounding these items meant that they may have been interred with an ancestor at the time of their taking. However, the same lack of records, either written or oral, meant that this could not be proven to the museum, leading the team to largely ignore this categorization.

Likewise, the category of Sacred Objects, led to some confusion within the Gitxaala team. When asked about whether items were sacred to the Gitxaala Nation, Nation members working in consultation with the team responded that of course the items were sacred, that they were sacred due to the connection that they provide to Gitxaala ancestors, law, protocol, and heritage. However, this definition contrasts with the NMAI's operating definition of 'sacred' which states, "Sacred objects are objects needed by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of Native American religions, including objects needed for the renewal of a religious practice." As the items connected to the Gitxaala Nation were not used within the practice of an overtly religious ritual in line with the NMAI's definition, it was difficult for the Gitxaala team to identify a specific context in which items would be used. Further, as some of the items were not directly used in the practice of feasting or other ceremonies, they could not be

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<sup>8</sup> For one case in which this categorization is not straightforward, see Campbell 2010's discussion of the repatriation of the Stone ancestor T'xwelátse.

claimed as a sacred object, despite the community's insistence that they were in fact sacred to them.

The definition of an Object of Cultural Patrimony presented another challenge to the team. While this was ultimately the label that the team chose for the majority of the requested items, the definition of the object "having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization or culture, rather than property owned by an individual Native American, and which, therefore, cannot be alienated, appropriated, or conveyed by any individual regardless of whether or not the individual is a member of the Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization" (NMAI Repatriation Protocol Sec. II A 4) resulted in intense debate among the team, and required deliberation and confirmation from the wider community.

This was largely due to the stipulation that Objects of Cultural Patrimony should hold cultural importance to the community at large, rather than as individually owned property. This contrasted with Johnson and the community's understanding of the *He:l* helmet as emblematic of the authority of the holder of the name *He:l*. The object's connection to the name signified its inalienable ownership by the holder of the name, and through that ownership stemmed the wider cultural importance of the helmet itself (Menzies 2016, 39). However, it was decided by the leadership of the Gitxaala Nation that ownership of all repatriated items would be retained by the entire Gitxaala Nation.<sup>9</sup> This was as opposed to ownership of the helmet returning to the current holder of the name *He:l*. Thus, categorizing the helmet as an Object of Cultural Patrimony was

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<sup>9</sup> Ownership was to be returned to the Nation as opposed to individual members, so that the Nation's forthcoming cultural centre could be more easily granted ownership of the returned items once on display.

seen to suffice to show its importance to the community. This decision, however, alters the interpretation of the helmet's importance to the community, forcing it into a contextualization as the heritage of the entire Gitxaala Nation, rather than the heritage of a named leader of the community.

Finally, the category of Items Acquired Illegally presented yet another challenge to the process of claims-making. While the NMAI uses this categorization to present a pathway for the return of "any materials acquired by or transferred to the NMAI illegally or under circumstances that render invalid the museum's claim to them" (NMAI Repatriation Protocol Sec. II A 5), it remains the prevailing belief among the Gitxaala Nation that all items that are held in museums were taken from them illegally, according to *their* laws. Although there is some record of items being sold, traded, or otherwise taken from the community with some form of consent, these items were taken from the community using Euro-Western justifications for ownership such as payment and/or ownership paperwork, and thus did not account for the specifics of Gitxaala law and custom. Further, those items that were removed from the community in accordance with Western legal practices did not always do so in accordance with Gitxaala laws. Instead, the items may have left the community at the hands of relatives of their rightful owners, rather than the owners themselves.<sup>10</sup>

From these examples, it is apparent that the required process of the categorization of cultural heritage presents difficulties for Indigenous communities to make claims to their heritage items held in museums. Instead of streamlining the categorization of requests, the claim-

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<sup>10</sup> A Gitxaala-specific example of this can be seen in the case of item A6797 held at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. This item was sold to a collector by a nephew of its owner, who then sold it to the museum.

making process requires that Indigenous Peoples mould their understandings of their heritage, practices, customs, and laws to fit the proposed categorization of what is allowed to be returned by the Museum.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, just as the NMAI's protocols dictate what authority can be shared by the Museum to Indigenous peoples, we see also that the protocols dictate the very material that the claims can be made for.

### *Repatriation in Wider Museum Context*

The work to incorporate the authority and sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples into the process of repatriation claims-making is part of a larger movement towards indigenizing museum spaces (e.g., Bruchac 2024, Glass 2014, Krmpotich 2024, Kreps 2024, Ronan 2014). In its larger context, this has influenced the direction of museum curation, conservation, and visitor engagement, which has included the development of community-curated exhibitions, community-led museums, and increased consultation and collaboration. However, while the field of museology has worked toward increasing the presence and visibility of Indigenous Peoples' control over museum processes, ultimately the approval process for repatriation claims themselves have not been shifted towards community control to the same degree. This is not to say that research and claims-making are not aspects of the repatriation process in which museum practice is being amended to increase community control. Rather, the fact that the research and claims process has been a key site for change highlights the fact that the protocols and laws surrounding the mechanism for claims approval have not been amended to the same degree.

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which the language of NAGPRA does not coincide with Indigenous ontologies see Davis and Krupa 2022.

Instead, as Ts'msyen scholar Robin Gray asserts, “claims for Indigenous repatriation are dealt with using colonial laws—the same laws that were used as justification to dispossess us in the first place” (2022, 16). In stating this, Gray highlights how despite museums’ actions to increase community collaboration, offer support, and provide multiple pathways toward return, ultimately, the process of justification for claims made on museum-held objects is channeled through the system of Euro-Western laws that enabled these objects to be taken in the first place.

To explicate this, exploring the case of the Gitxaala-NMAI repatriation claims process has shown that the claims-making process has resulted in frictions surrounding the negotiation of timelines and justifications for the return of heritage items. The most visible of the power negotiations between Gitxaala and the NMAI took the form of Johnson’s refusal to accept anything other than full ownership of the requested items and resulted in discontent with the projected timeline of their return. At the same time, the NMAI’s direct support of the Gitxaala Nation’s research and claims-making process was contingent on Shannon’s ability to draw on existing structures within the NMAI, in order to offer the support of archivists, as well as monetary assistance.

Therefore, it is clear that both parties’ abilities to collaborate with one another were limited by their abilities to engage in collaborative efforts according to the structure set by the protocols governing the NMAI. In practice, this means that not only was Shannon’s ability to cede power and authority limited by the confines of NMAI protocol, but that Johnson and the Gitxaala research team were also limited in the actions that we could take by the NMAI’s protocols, definitions, and timelines. This shows that while collaborative actions and power sharing are possible in the case of repatriation, they are largely only possible during the research and claims-making stages of the process, the areas in which the NMAI’s protocols allow for it.

### *Repatriation as Processual – Conclusion*

From all of this, it is clear that repatriation is not simply a one-time event that results in a mutually agreeable return of heritage from museums to Indigenous communities. Instead, the work surrounding the claims-making process exists within Onciul's paradigm of the engagement zone, and that the actual act of the return of items is representative of only part of the repatriation process. Further, we have seen that the negotiation of power dynamics that engagement zones make visible (Onciul 2015, 72) occur not only between Indigenous Peoples and museums, but between the institution of museums and their staff. This negotiation of power dynamics is represented by the ways in which museum staff can share their authority with Indigenous community collaborators, just as they themselves act to derive their power from the larger structures of the museum's protocols and institutional authority itself. Thus, despite the benefits of taking actions to increase processes of collaboration and power sharing, the indigenization of the repatriation process is not possible in regard to the actual approval of claims. Actions like power sharing and collaboration are therefore not sufficient to transfer power over the repatriation process to Indigenous communities under the current U.S. governance structures for repatriation.



## **Repatriation Claims as Autoethnographic**

### *Introduction*

Because of the unequal power dynamics present between museums and Indigenous Peoples within a given repatriation engagement zone, the structured and prescribed nature of the receipt of claims, and the blended mode of communication that they represent, I argue that the formation and submission of a repatriation claim is an act of autoethnography. In arguing this, I bring to the forefront the idea that understanding repatriation claims as autoethnographic calls to mind a specific and intentional act of resistance to the contemporary form of repatriation claims-making as mandated by museum protocols. Taken in context with the previous findings that current practices of collaboration and power sharing are not enough to indigenize the approval of repatriation claims, the understanding of repatriation claims-making as autoethnographic highlights the Euro-Western models of authority at play within contemporary repatriation practice. Further, engaging with repatriation claims as a form of autoethnography calls attention to the need to move beyond the current repatriation paradigm, and to take seriously the need for Indigenous Peoples' full control over the process of the repatriation of their heritage.

### *Claims as Autoethnography*

First coined by Mary Louise Pratt, the concept of autoethnography was intended to describe “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (Pratt 1991, 35). Pratt defines autoethnographic materials as those that are written by a marginalized group as an act of self-representation, produced in direct response to dominant groups' representations of them. Pratt continues to describe the form of autoethnographies, showing that they are constructed via the blending of Indigenous and colonial mediums, taking the form of Indigenous communication styles and

idioms rendered into a form recognizable by Euro-Western society (1991, 35). Autoethnography describes a product of what Pratt labelled the “contact zone,” the space in which dominant and marginalized peoples meet and negotiate, underpinned by asymmetrical power dynamics stemming from shared histories made incommensurable through experiences of dispossession, marginalization, and dehumanization.

Pratt’s concept of contact zones was taken up by James Clifford, who identified museums as potential contact zones, places where power dynamics are negotiated between Indigenous Peoples and colonial society. In framing museums as contact zones, Clifford centers museums as sites for ongoing contact between the ontologies of Indigenous Peoples and Euro-Western society at large. Clifford argues that the formation of a contact zone can present a space that benefits both museums and Indigenous stakeholders (Clifford 1997, 197) as the negotiation of power dynamics presents a space in which Indigenous agency can be brought to the forefront (1997, 194).

However, Robin Boast calls into question the concept of a contact zone as a reciprocal space of benefit. Instead, Boast reminds us of the role of autoethnography in Pratt’s original conceptualization, noting that the process of producing an autoethnographic account is critically contingent on a community’s decision to represent itself. According to Boast, what is missing from Clifford’s adaptation of contact zones, despite his focus on the potential for agency to be enacted, is a direct accounting for the appellate role of autoethnography against a dominant culture’s acts of representation, and the key role that Indigenous self-representation takes in creating a space for entry into the discourses of Euro-Western society (Boast 2011, 9).

Building on the work of Pratt, Clifford, Boast, and Onciul, I identify the production of a repatriation claim as autoethnography. First, repatriation claims are made necessary by the result

of histories of marginalization, dispossession, and dehumanization and are responses to contemporary injustices and grievances borne of these histories. Second, repatriation claims are produced as a form of self-representation, a claim to ownership of not only the physical items held by museums, but also to the authority to recognize the true importance, context, and relationality of a community's heritage by that community. Thirdly, there is an 'acceptable' form of a repatriation claim, mediated by the authority of the museum and by Euro-Western law. This requirement of form mandates that the repatriation claims be made into a form recognizable by the museum's institutional authority. This in turn forces Indigenous understandings of their own heritage to be moulded to fit categorizations created by Euro-Western society, which serve to make understandable Indigenous Peoples' connections to their own heritage.

Given this, I argue that formulating a place for autoethnography within the discourse around repatriation is critical to showing the power structures at play within this case study. Understanding repatriation claims-making as a form of autoethnography is important, as framing Indigenous communities' work in this way presents the process of undertaking repatriation as a form of resistance to authority, and highlights ways in which the act of power negotiation is made evident. This negotiation is inherent to contemporary synthesis of the contact zone into the concept of the engagement zone, as Onciul has argued that the products of museums and Indigenous Peoples' collaboration can "be seen as the tangible manifestations of power negotiations between the engagement zone participants, and the wider museums and communities they represent" (2015, 72).

Applying this to the Gitxaala-NMAI case study, despite the negotiation of power occurring between the repatriation research team and the OaEP staff, their negotiations impact the wider Gitxaala community and reflect on the NMAI at large. Shannon, as the primary point

of contact between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation, is representative of not only the NMAI, but also of wider Western museology. At the same time, Johnson is representative of the Gitxaala community, who are seeking redress for the history of dispossession that they have faced. Thus, as participants in the engagement zone, the power imbalances and negotiations that occur are representative of the wider imbalances and negotiations between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation, and between Indigenous Nations and Euro-Western society at large.

With this contextualization, positioning repatriation claims-making as a form of autoethnography highlights the acts of resistance that we have seen from Johnson as a form of power negotiation. His community-backed refusal to engage with the avenues of return that take the form of short- or long-term loans shows that the Gitxaala community are intentionally making clear that they are the rightful owners of their heritage. Further, the suggestion that the Gitxaala delegation should be able to visit and return home with an item of their heritage from the collections shows that the Gitxaala community are intentionally offering a self-representation of their desires for the return of their heritage, in contrast to the NMAI's articulation of the potentialities for return.

Johnson's acts of refusal therefore show concrete ways by which the Gitxaala Nation can assert control over the repatriation process. They also simultaneously necessitate that the NMAI recognize Gitxaala's political sovereignty (Simpson 2014, 11). Further, they imply that the NMAI should consider why it is that they have the institutional authority to present the terms by which cultural heritage returns home, when they themselves are directly and indirectly responsible for heritage items' contemporary displacement from the Gitxaala Nation.

However, the framework for the return of Gitxaala heritage is ultimately still contingent on the NMAI's adherence to US law. Johnson's acts of refusal and his insistence on following

the pathways for return that align with the Gitxaala community's desires show that there is power to be taken within the confines of US law. However, while communities can act to assert their sovereignty within the legal structures governing repatriation, their ability to do so is still subject to the confines of the potentialities for return laid out within NMAI protocol and are in that way a reification of the historically hierarchical relationship between Indigenous peoples and Euro-Western society.

Thus, Johnson's acts of refusal – alongside the repatriation claims themselves - are in line with Boast's interpretation of autoethnography as a "rhetorical genre" as opposed to being limited to a textual practice (2011, 62). This rhetorical action can be seen further through the Gitxaala team's navigation of the claims-making process's categorization. The moulding of Gitxaala-specific ways of relating to and understanding their heritage into recognizable forms to be presented to the NMAI repatriation team and Board of Trustees shows the blending of traditional and colonial idioms proposed by Pratt, and again highlight the inherently hierarchical aspects of the relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples that the current repatriation paradigm reifies.

Ultimately, conceptualizing of the repatriation claims-making process as a form of autoethnography highlights the divergence between the NMAI's representation of what Indigenous Peoples want from the return of their heritage and the case-by-case examples that arise from the desires of communities themselves. While Shannon – through her tentative methodology – suggested multiple possible modes of return for Gitxaala heritage, these possibilities are the result of the NMAI's policies *allowing* for these specific ways for objects to be released from their collections. However, only one of these pathways truly results in the return of ownership of heritage back to communities, while the others exemplify a form of power

sharing that simply extends the authority of the NMAI to Indigenous Peoples rather than supplanting it.

If autoethnography is to be considered a critical part of the formation of an engagement zone in which power negotiations are made evident, then we must consider that museums' abilities to take part in engagement zone work are again contingent on institutional protocol, funding, and outside influence from legal frameworks (Onciul 2015, 85). Therefore, echoing Boast's (2011) critique of contact zones, the negotiations that occur within the engagement zone are intrinsically a symptom of the NMAI's authority stemming from Western legal frameworks, and thus a reification of a neocolonial relationship between Museums and Indigenous Peoples.

#### *Moving Beyond the Current Paradigm*

Because of the neocolonial relationship between museums and Indigenous Peoples, we can begin to unpack the need for a new paradigm governing repatriation claims. Onciul argues that museums' ceding community control over processes is not a conclusion and answer to the neocolonial paradigm, but rather the beginning of a new dynamic between museums and Indigenous Peoples that presents space for the renewed negotiation of power dynamics (2015, 82). This negotiation necessitates that museums take seriously their relationships with both non-human and human actors, and in doing so make connections that extend beyond the museum and emphasize the importance of Indigenous ontologies within collaborations (Onciul 2015, 86).

Onciul's concept of engagement zones presents a lens by which we can look towards the formation of an indigenized paradigm for repatriation claims, especially as she notes that within engagement zones, "participants continually negotiate the rules of exchange, challenging and debating power and authority. Cultural concepts such as expertise, customary boundaries and hierarchies, come into question and negotiation" (2015, 85). These cultural concepts are not

limited to the overt structures of power she lists, however, as they also include the power that Indigenous ontologies have within the engagement. In context, this means that a critical facet of the negotiation of power becomes the extent to which Indigenous ontologies and understandings of their own relationships to their heritage are mobilized. From this, in questioning the roles and implementation of culturally derived concepts like expertise, hierarchy, and the nature of relationships, we see the beginning of the ways in which the indigenization of the process of repatriation can begin.

In arguing against shared stewardship, and for the return of the He:l helmet in accordance with the Gitxaala Nation's understanding of ownership, Johnson's acts of refusal exemplify a mode of how the rules of exchange are negotiated by Indigenous Peoples within their engagement with museums. These acts of refusal dictate that the implementation of concepts such as hierarchy, expertise, and relationality be conducted with Indigenous law and praxis in mind, that the Gitxaala Nation's sovereignty be recognized (Simpson 2014), and - critically - that Indigenous ontologies be brought to the forefront of the repatriation process and be empowered to lead the process of the return of their heritage.

The effects of this refusal align also with Robin Gray's articulation of rematriation. She states, "rematriation, grounded in Indigenous law, means that any movement to recover disinterred ancestors or stolen, misappropriated, or commodified belongings from states, subjects, and institutions must go beyond repatriation to achieve true reparation and redress." (Gray 2022, 3). Therefore, in refusing modes of return that did not result in the return of ownership to the Gitxaala Nation, and seeking to return home with Gitxaala heritage, Johnson sought to affirm the Gitxaala understanding that the items held by the NMAI were obligated – in accordance with Gitxaala Law – to be returned fully to Gitxaala territory and ownership as soon

as possible; that they be returned to their proper relational context. Invoking the idea of repatriation is not intended to say that repatriation or museums must be abolished completely. Rather, it is the implacable authority of museums within the process that must be questioned, and the intrinsically Euro-Western modes of law that form repatriation legislation and protocol that should be worked against in favor of principles guided by Indigenous ontologies.

In their 2023 article, “Repatriation as Pedagogy” Anderson and Atalay discuss the Euro-Western model of research, positing that understanding repatriation as pedagogy is a call to question the ways in which the academy, museums, and colonial authority as a whole have shaped the ways in which ideas of learning and knowledge production are mobilized, and have therefore necessitated the act of repatriation itself (2023, 671). They further argue that through repatriation claims-making, “we see communities Indigenizing spaces and practices that were built on and function through logics of linearity, division, control, and property” (2023, 671). These logics are the same culturally derived concepts that Onciul describes as being open to renegotiation through engagement zones, and the same aspects of repatriation that Gray problematizes.<sup>12</sup>

In addressing the neocolonial nature of contemporary repatriations, Anderson and Atalay suggest that repatriation can be a form of pedagogy for museums. In doing so, they describe how engaging with the process of repatriation from an Indigenous ontology creates a learning opportunity through which museums can become open to the indigenization of their processes and become open to truly shifting the balance of power towards Indigenous Peoples’ ontologies. Through the case studies that they highlight, we see how an indigenized repatriation process

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<sup>12</sup> See Gray’s comment on Anderson and Atalay’s “Repatriation as Pedagogy” (Anderson and Atalay 2023, 681)



destabilises the role of the museum as the sole knowledge producing entity, and how the process of Indigenization itself requires that museums introduce “Indigenous ways of knowing and being into the daily work of repatriation.” (2023, 671). The incorporation of Indigenous ontologies into repatriation practices and protocols present the method for the incorporation of Indigenous praxis into the functioning of the museum, and thus a critical way in which the neocolonial relationship between museums and Indigenous Peoples can be addressed.

Anderson and Atalay show how contemporary academic work regarding repatriation largely takes the form of ethnographies of repatriation. These ethnographies “[question] the histories and logics of research, the acquisition of cultural collections, the classificatory regimes that actively hide the taking [of Indigenous heritage], minimizing its extent and its ongoing effects” (2023, 674). They further work to define the category of Indigenous ethnographies of repatriation, which act to make evident the connections that Indigenous communities have with their heritage held in museums (2023, 674). According to Anderson and Atalay the categorization of Indigenous ethnographies of repatriation includes the very repatriation claims made to museums, discussing the same factors that I have argued represent the autoethnographic nature of repatriation claims:

As part of the documentary evidence required for a successful repatriation claim from a community to an institution, these ethnographies have a different purpose and politics. They turn an Indigenous gaze onto museums and become refusals by detailing the assumed Western cultural norm that led to separation of ancestors and cultural belongings out of their rightful relational context. These ethnographies of repatriation serve as a community action that inevitably questions a museums’ authority to ownership in the first instance (2023, 674).

In acting as refusals, Anderson and Atalay argue that repatriation claims-making itself can be constituted as a form of resistance to the neo-colonial models of ownership that perpetuate museums’ holding of Indigenous heritage. Thus, these refusals present a way that Indigenous

Peoples can go against the neocolonial practices of museums and instead offer Indigenous self-representations for how museums should engage with, and be guided by, Indigenous ontologies (2023, 675). These refusals are in line with an understanding of autoethnography as a rhetorical genre, as they are intentional acts of non-recognition of the assumed validity of museum's holding of Indigenous heritage, and simultaneously acknowledgement of Indigenous communities' ownership of the heritage held in museums, all conducted through the mobilization of Indigenous ontologies and relationships to their heritage.

Returning to the case of the Gitxaala Nation and NMAI, we see that Anderson and Atalay's argument supports my own regarding the autoethnographic nature of repatriation claims. Johnson's actions on behalf of the Gitxaala Nation refuse anything other than the return and full ownership of Gitxaala heritage; they represent the Nation's refusal of the NMAI's ownership of their heritage, and a refusal to accept that the NMAI continues to own Gitxaala heritage. We see also that the Gitxaala Nation, through Johnson, are offering to the NMAI a representation of how they would like to see their laws, protocols, and understandings of their heritage to be respected, and the ways in which they believe repatriation should be conducted in accordance with these values, principles, and laws.

I argue that these actions of refusal call attention to the need for museums to engage with repatriation claims-making through a fully new protocol. As such, they must incorporate what Anderson and Atalay discuss in describing repatriation as pedagogy, and what Gray highlights as a critical component of repatriation. This new protocol must, on a case-by-case basis, center on a relational and Indigenous-law-derived understanding of the connections that heritage items in museum collections have to the communities from which they came, rather than an

understanding stemming through a Euro-Western legal model positioning these heritage items as disparate elements of property.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, understanding repatriation as a process, rather than as an outcome, reveals how it is a complex exchange that goes beyond the return of cultural heritage from museums to Indigenous Peoples. Instead, we see a negotiation of power dynamics taking place, representative of a wider struggle between Indigenous ontologies and Euro-Western models of power. This negotiation is not confined solely to representatives of Indigenous groups and of museums. Instead, it extends to the internal struggles between museum staff and museums themselves, wherein museum staff are forced to derive their very ability to engage with anticolonial efforts from institutional structures rooted in neocolonial modes of thinking.

Further, the case study of the repatriation negotiations between the NMAI and the Gitxaala Nation reveals how acts of resistance and refusal work to shift the fabric of a collaboration towards the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' desire for control over the process. Ultimately, this case study shows that the only way to address these frictions is for museums to re-evaluate their process for repatriation claims approval. A re-evaluation is needed for the development of repatriation claims-making beyond its current form, into one which recognizes Indigenous ontologies and the relational connections that Indigenous Peoples have to their heritage. This development likewise needs to move toward building increased capacity into museum structures for Indigenous Peoples to take back ownership of their heritage in accordance with their own laws and praxis, and in a way which displaces the hierarchical and neocolonial relationship to both Indigenous Peoples and their heritage.

As a response to the imbalances of power, the indigenization of the repatriation process becomes a method by which the longstanding authority of museums within knowledge creation and validation can be addressed. Just as Anderson and Atalay (2023) advocate for repatriation as

a form of pedagogy, I recommend that museums embrace Indigenous praxis and share their authority through the recognition and mobilization of Indigenous ontologies. From the development of a new paradigm comes an avenue to destabilize the current monopoly on knowledge production, and to instead deploy Indigenous ontologies to work towards solving the inequitable distribution of power between museums and Indigenous Peoples.

Understanding repatriation claims-making as a form of autoethnography, we begin to see the work the indigenization of the repatriation process will require. As a key facet of correcting the relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples, repatriation claims-making processes are revealed as sites through which Indigenous communities advocate for their self representations for the indigenization of the repatriation process, and an avenue through which the indigenization of the museum at large can begin.

The process of the indigenization of museums is not simple. While collaboration between museums and Indigenous peoples is needed to work towards an indigenized and anticolonial relationship between them, only by engaging in a full renegotiation of the role of Western models of authority and expertise within museum power structures, and through museum staff's recognition and incorporation of Indigenous ontologies of relationality into their work, can the indigenization of the repatriation process begin. Looking to the future, by centering the relationships that Indigenous peoples have to their heritage and laws within the repatriation process, and by working collaboratively to shift the ways in which repatriation claims are approved, the frictions that arise between museums and Indigenous Peoples can be addressed. By working to implement Indigenous communities' self-representations for what the return of their heritage looks like, the relationships between communities and their heritage can be celebrated, and the return of heritage back into its relational contexts within communities,

territories, and traditional ownership can be achieved in a way that is beneficial for all parties involved.

## Figures

Figure 1 –Item 11/1741 “War Helmet representing a Grizzly Bear.”



Figure 2 - Accession Card for 11/1741 “War Helmet representing a Grizzly Bear.”

49. Ceremonial, family hat used only upon special occasions, representing the clan crest a Killer whale. It is ornamented with copper and painted in the native colors prominently in the greatly valued stone blue. From the Simshaan people of British Columbia.

11/1741

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