(MORE) USEFUL COLLECTIONS

Making Digitized Collections Useful.
What can we learn from current Smithsonian work with source communities?

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Original project proposal from 2010, updated April 2011:

This fellowship project proposes to study the Smithsonian projects “Sharing Knowledge” (Artic Studies Center, Anchorage/Washington) and “ Recovering Voices” (NMNH, NMAI and CFCH, Washington) in order to learn how museums can enhance the reception and use of digitised collections in source communities. This will make digitised collections more useful and help reaching the exciting potential of digitisation.

This is a timely question as digitising has become so important for keeping up with the possibilities of technology that most museums have so far had to focus more on completing the digitisation process than exploring how the digitised collections can and will be used. Such explorations could be inspirational and give museum employees better motivation in the face of seemingly endless digitisation processes.

As a museum anthropologist I am also concerned with how source communities perceive the difference between virtual and physical access to museum artefacts, and how they feel about the tentative, and already disputed, concept of “virtual repatriation”. Though virtual access to museum objects would seem better than no repatriation or access at all I suppose this virtual presence might, as a visual reminder, actually trigger a physical feeling of absence and the need of touching, owning and therefore reclaiming the object. At the same time, I think digitisation opens up for more teamwork among museums and their communities, and that this will benefit all.

The ongoing “Sharing Knowledge” project of the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center (ASC) seems to be an inspiring example of good collaboration with source communities and has already resulted in a very interesting database. In May 2010 the artefacts that so far have been virtually accessible through the database were deposited and put on display in the exhibition “Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage” at the new ASC branch in Anchorage –and thus these artefacts are now physically closer to their source communities. This is a good opportunity for studying how participants in the Sharing Knowledge project and visitors to the new exhibition in Anchorage compare digital access to the physical, and how they feel about this project so far.

A similar, and wider, project is initiated at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. This new project, called “ Recovering Voices: A Learning Archive for Endangered Languages and Indigenous Knowledge”, will ask how to sustain the diversity of indigenous languages and knowledge and what science can learn from them (Bell 2009:45). As “Recovering Voices” is in its initial stage of planning it is also a good moment and opportunity to study how the participants at the different museums envision the project and what they have learned from the “Sharing Knowledge”-project.

By studying these Smithsonian initiatives this fellowship project hopes to inspire other museums in how to collaborate and make their collections useful for source communities and the general public.
Acknowledgments and editorial note: Sincere thanks to the Smithsonian Center of Education and Museum Studies, the Smithsonian Women’s Committee and supervisors for the great possibility that this fellowship has been. Also, thanks to everyone I met in Anchorage and Washington. Central figures of the two Smithsonian projects I studied were appointed as supervisors and facilitated interviews with relevant people, but my research was carried out independently and the views in this report are based on my own interpretations and understanding.

Introducing the project: As museums try to keep up with new technologies and the expectations of their audiences it has the last decades become a must to digitize the collections for public access online. This is an exciting possibility for museums to display - and for audiences to discover - objects that there never would be enough space to exhibit in the physical museum. Digitized collections can be searched, explored and used in new ways more easily, and in that sense make the collections more useful for people. Yet the process of digitizing even small collections can be so labor intensive that there is little room for revision of the object documentation and preparation for how the public will welcome and use the collection once it is online.
Digitization of ethnographic collections raises additional questions about its process and reception as these collections often have problematic origins and consist of objects that can be important for the cultural identity of their source community. Ethnographic collections have roots in the cabinets of curiosity and eurocentric thoughts about some people being more savage than others, and therefore fitted for display in natural science museums. Most of these source communities have not been part of the general museum audience because of geographical distance or cultural difference, but are today increasingly connected through the Internet and interested in their past. With more and more collections going online people in these communities can now discover objects of their ancestors that they might not even know existed. The less exciting side of this is that they also may discover objects that were collected without the proper consent and be disappointed with the often erroneous and poor documentation done by the museum.

Most museum anthropologists, who normally take pride in defending the source communities’ point of view, can feel divided between such positive and problematic sides of digitization and unsure of how to do things right. And in addition many of us are probably also burdened by a feeling of guilt for wrong doings of our “anthropological ancestors” and other people who collected for museums and therefore really want to do things better now.

**So my overarching question was:**

How can digitization revitalize both museum collections and source communities, and in my understanding, become more “useful”?

**Project focus:** In order to learn more about how museums can make digitized ethnographic collections more useful, help reaching the exciting potential of digitization and avoid its pitfalls this fellowship project chose to study the Smithsonian initiatives “Sharing Knowledge/Living Our Cultures” (Artic Studies Center, Anchorage) and “Recovering Voices” (National Museum of Natural History, National Museum of the American Indian and the Center of Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Washington). These projects are interconnected and related to the Department of Anthropology of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in Washington D.C., a museum that many visitors associate more with natural sciences than with anthropology and contemporary human cultures. Yet, like other all-compassing 19th century museums the NMNH (earlier called the U.S. National Museum) wanted to present everything related to the natural world -including some of the human societies living in it. Today the old Eurocentric displays of “savage societies” are long gone and there is currently only one and much newer ethnographic exhibition in the NMNH in D.C. (“African Voices” from 1999), though visitors might also see an anthropological presence in exhibitions like “Race. Why
are we so different?”,”Written In Bones”, the Hall of Human Origins or in single objects like the statue from Rapa Nui. However, beyond the public space of the museum the Department of Anthropology is an active body of research and collaborative museum projects, like the ones studied in this fellowship.

“Sharing Knowledge/Living Our Cultures” (also known internally as the “Anchorage-project”) is a series of projects initiated by the Arctic Studies Center (ASC) of NMNH in Washington D.C. and Anchorage, Alaska aimed at making the Smithsonian’s Alaska collections more accessible to its source communities. Currently the name “Sharing Knowledge” is used more specifically about the collection website (www.alaska.si.edu, launched in 2007) that now accompanies the exhibition “Living Our Cultures. Sharing Our Heritage. First Peoples of Alaska” (opened May 2010) in Anchorage Museum. And in turn this exhibition (and the ten years it took to make it) is said to be only the beginning of collection-based collaboration work with Alaska Native groups as the physical presence of the objects has opened up for workshops and seminars (see language and Snowshoe workshops) as part of programs like “Recovering Voices”. This exhibition project stands out as a good example of the Smithsonian lending out (more than 600) artifacts to a source community and the website is still very unusual in its focus on indigenous knowledge and the rich contextual documentation. It was this website that made me interested in the Smithsonian fellowship and the project has also become inspiration for the “Recovering Voices” and other collaborative projects.

See my blog entries about it the website, the exhibition, the Snowshoe workshop, a spotlight talk, their own information page, their YouTube playlist and the blog of the conservators on the project here.
"Recovering Voices. Documenting and Sustaining Endangered Languages and Knowledge" (RV) is a new Smithsonian Program (established in 2009) developed by the NMNH in partnership with the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH). Like the name indicates it will promote the documentation and revitalization of the world’s endangered languages and knowledge and invites source communities to reconnect with relevant Smithsonian collections (ethnographic, linguistic, natural history) from their regions. Among the 7.4 million records that can be searched through the Smithsonian Collections Search Center there are recordings of languages no longer spoken and artifacts that can recall almost forgotten vocabulary and knowledge in their source communities. In all it is estimated that the Smithsonian holds some 137 million objects, 1.5 million library volumes, and 89,000 cubic feet of archival material. These vast collections, together with Smithsonian’s reputation for excellence in research, outreach and education, can make the Recovering Voices become an important center of global language revitalization efforts and the expectations are as high as the possibilities are many. I especially liked that, in addition to documenting and revitalizing language itself, the RV is concerned with how knowledge/language sustainability is influenced by intergenerational dynamics and with how to ensure that collaboration will be useful to both museum and communities. Equally exciting is RV’s goal of uniting and working across old disciplinary boundaries within the Smithsonian, like those between social and natural sciences. And I think it is important that RV, through its outreach activities, will alert the general public about the dangers of the language death taking place globally and encourage revitalization through renewed understanding and pride.

Five initial research projects are already under way; with the Hopi Pueblo in Northern Arizona (Gwyneira Isaac), the I’ai communities in Purari Delta, Papua New Guinea (Joshua Bell), the San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec communities in Los Angeles, CA, USA and Oaxaca, Mexico (Gabriela Pérez Báez), the Meskwaki and the Sauk communities in Iowa and Oklahoma (Ives Goddard) and the Athabascan communities in Alaska (Aron Crowell). In 2013 the popular Smithsonian Folklife Festival will be dedicated to language and there will be exhibitions on RV topics in both NMNH and NMAI.

See my blog entries about it here and their current RV project site.
The fellowship focused on these two clusters of Smithsonian work with source communities, and they form the main material of this report. Though during the fieldwork I also found good inspiration elsewhere, like in ANLAMS (Alaska Native Library, Museum and Archives Summit), the RRN (Reciprocal Research Network), SIMA (Summer Institute of Museum Anthropology), the Smithsonian Mobile Learning Center and the Smithsonian Commons.

**Methodology and practical organization of the fellowship:** The fieldwork of the fellowship was carried out between April and September 2011; the first half of the time based in the Artic Studies Center in Anchorage and the other half based in the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History. It consisted in observation and analysis of exhibits, project meetings and interviews/conversations with museum staff, project members and museum visitors.

In Anchorage in April I started off attending ANLAMS, the first Alaska Native Library, Archives and Museum Summit, which brought together people from the heritage sector from all over Alaska. The ASC was represented by director Dr. Aron Crowell and assistant curator Dawn Biddison who gave a useful talk about how to start projects similar to the Sharing Knowledge. The most relevant activity during my time in Anchorage was the Athabascan Snowshoe Workshop organized by the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the ASC (as a Recovering Voices activity), May 1-6. Traditional making of snowshoes has been identified as one of the most endangered Alaska Native arts, and three of the last known snowshoe artists were invited to bring one apprentice each to this workshop in order to pass on their knowledge. The workshop was held in a laboratory visible from the exhibition hall of “Living Our Cultures” and regular museum visitors and school classes were also invited to learn. It also became quite a media event and I have written more [here](#) on my project blog.

Apart from these major events I attended another of the ASC’s monthly Smithsonian Spotlight talk (see blog entry on Ethan Petticrew’s talk [here](#)), their monthly “Curator’s Tour” of the exhibition (once with director Crowell and once with curator Dawn Biddison) and observed class visits and regular visitors (tourists and Alaska Natives) in the exhibition hall. I did short informal interviews with some of the visitors, yet most of my interviews were with members of the Native Advisory Board for the Living Our Cultures exhibition and were facilitated through director Crowell.

Moving onto Washington D.C. and the Department of Anthropology in July I started off observing parts of the three week long Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology (SIMA) where a little group of students from all over the country are taught how to explore the collections for specific research projects.
Then I attended the project planning meetings of Recovering Voices, relevant seminar talks (especially one by Aron Glass), interviewed most of the RV project group in the different partner institutions and gave two talks.

Being used to do fieldwork on a small Pacific Island where the supposed informants quickly start interviewing the interviewer it was very different doing fieldwork in an urban landscape of museums, offices and busy people. Problems of shyness and even language kept me from being as outgoing as hoped, but once making appointments by e-mail and phone people were very friendly and interested.

**Research questions and tentative answers:** Like is often the case with anthropological research the questions in my initial proposal were adjusted to the realities met during the fieldwork. The overall focus was to learn how to collaborate with source communities in digitization processes, its benefit and challenges and thus how to make digitized collections more useful. Here are some tentative answers.

- **How can digitization revitalize communities and collections?** This was my big question and it has no short answer, but I’m still optimistic about the possibilities opened up by digitization -and in my understanding of it: its “usefulness”. Like I’ve always thought myself, and also heard repeated during the fieldwork, any object can have interesting stories to tell and digitization opens up for discovering more objects and sharing the stories about them. And discovering objects and stories of one’s ancestors adds another dimension of personal relevance that can inspire pride and new interests in cultural heritage.

- **How to ensure that online collections will be more useful than disappointing for source communities?** Here a short answer is simply collaboration and I found the chosen Smithsonian projects to be very good examples. Yet collaboration is much easier on paper than in practice. Ideally the museum could collaborate with source communities already in the planning of the digitization process and the building of the collection database, but very few museums have had the financial means, time or staff to do this.

- **Collaboration builds best on trusting and personal relationships.** So, if the answer is to collaborate, where to start and how to do that right? Source communities often have a problematic history with museums and have difficulties trusting them as many objects were literally stolen from them or collected without the proper consent, and then often displayed with erroneous and degrading information. On the other side museum employees and anthropologists can be burdened and influenced by a feeling of “original sin” in relationship to source communities of the collections. When starting the “Sharing Knowledge/Living Our Cultures” ASC Director Aron Crowell read everything that had ever been written on Alaska Native art and culture in order to have the best background when inviting Native Elders to visit the collections in D.C. Who to invite can also be an issue, as source communities are made up of individuals and sub groups that not always act as one. The ASC decided to let the
cultural organizations of each community make the choice for both the Elders delegations and for the Native Advisory Board that would assist with the exhibition planning. During Advisory Board meetings everything was actually written down and then notes exchanged in order to correct each other’s understanding of what had been said. Still, there were misconceptions both among the Native advisors and the museum staff that had to be sorted out. And as some of the Native board members said, it was only far into the process that they started believing that the museum staff actually were listening and had no hidden agendas. Crowell and Assistant curator Dawn Biddison built on the personal relationships and good reputation they both already had in Native communities in Alaska, and the other researchers in the Recovering Voices program start their personal projects in communities they already know well. That personal relationships is a good way to start a collaboration project is logical, but ethnographic collections are often quite global and not many museums have enough employees to have a specialist per source community represented in the collection.

For these cases ASC partner and inspiration Ann Fienup-Riordan proposed that the museum could contact the communities in question simply to offer access to the digitized collections and then await the reaction before proposing any project. And like ASC has experienced after the success of the “Sharing Knowledge” once a good working relationship has been established new projects can be proposed by the source community members themselves. Like Crowell repeated several times, the ten year process of making of the “Sharing Knowledge” database and the “Living Our Cultures” exhibition was only the beginning of ASC’s collaboration with communities in Alaska.

- **Collaboration done well is expensive and labor intensive.** Consultation and collaboration are often used as synonyms, but the latter is a much deeper commitment with the source community, transferring more definition power from the museum to the community members and meaning much more work. Because of little funding Crowell worked alone when doing the pre-selection of about 600 out of more than 30,000 objects for the hands-on sessions with the Alaska Elders (and then some of the selected objects could not travel to Alaska because of their conservation status). However, during these sessions the Elders could influence the final choice of objects for the exhibition and the Advisory Board in Anchorage were listened to regarding how to exhibit them. Crowell had also done his best to avoid choosing objects that might be sensitive or NAGPRA material. Some of the board members noted that they were still only advisors, but the museum staff felt they were breaking barriers compared to standard exhibition processes and conservation guidelines. Another important feature of this project is that all the sessions with the Alaska Elders in D.C. were videotaped, transcribed and translated. This is enormous work and even if one can pay it can be difficult to find translators with time to do the work. For Crowell the resulting three thousand pages of conversation notes are one of the invaluable fruits of the Sharing Knowledge project, as the taped conversations are much easier to use for research and outreach once they are transcribed, translated and indexed. For instance, the tab called “Elders discussion” of each object record page on the Sharing
Knowledge website has edited transcripts of everything the Elders said about the artifact in question. They even give a sense of being there with them and an understanding of how special these meetings between artifacts and people were. And equally important, they communicate that the Native knowledge is taken seriously (though I will problematize this later) and this again can reinforce trust and good working relationships.

**How collaborative can an online collection be?** Even though when most museums now want to collaborate and give source communities more power over the collections issues of intellectual property and different cultural protocols can complicate the collaboration. Public institutions like the Smithsonian should allow equal access to its collections for everyone, but some of the source communities that now can access information about their own heritage through the Internet still live in societies where free circulation of such knowledge is culturally wrong. These are complicated issues where anthropologists and people who thought they were on the source community’s side can get confused about what would be the best practice. The NMAI (National Museum of the American Indian) has a policy of revising every single object record before eventually publishing it online, but for the immense collections of the NMNH this is not thought as practically possible and instead they listen to feedback about the published records. The Sharing Knowledge database with its mere 700 objects (from both NMAI and NMNH), specific funding and focus on collaboration was tailored to include Native language and knowledge information.

Most problematic objects were excluded and the public is alerted about sensitive material before accessing it on the touch screens. So although this database dates from the early 2000s (online since 2006) and is becoming technically outdated I still find it to be good inspiration. Equally inspirational are two other database projects I came across during fieldwork. Anthropologist Aaron Glass and the U’mista cultural center’s database of the Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwakiutl) collection in the Ethnological Museum Berlin is built to allow plural provenances and information that is important to its source community (database will be accessible through the Reciprocal Research Network). The website of the Inuvialuit Living History project with among others anthropologist Kate Hennessy and ASC archaeologist Stephen Loring will present NMNH’s Mc Farlane collection on Inuvialuit terms (will be accessible at inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca). However, unique and customized databases are not always easily linked together and the culture specific information can be difficult to integrate in the main databases of the museums. At the NMNH the discussion of how to integrate the information from the Elders discussions into their main database (EMu) went beyond practical issues like EMu not having a layout compatible with Sharing Knowledge (see example of EMu record here to compare with a Sharing Knowledge object record here). Curators and technical staff have discussed how to interpret indigenous knowledge in order to match it with the more traditional curatorial expertise of museums, but not found a satisfactory way yet. So far it has been decided that the EMu records will link to the transcripts and videos of the Elders’ discussion deposited in the National Anthropological Archives. Personally I find all additional information about objects anthropologically interesting, yet I understand that not all of it is equally valid scientifically and that also
information from source community members should be assessed critically. Still, once again the anthropological guilt might make me less critical than I should be.

“I began to see through the veil of silence about our history and culture. I learned, in places other than school, that we were a courageous and ingenious people who had made a rich life under sometimes inhospitable conditions.”

— Paul Ongtooguk (Inupiaq), from “Their Silence about Us”

Is collaboration work sufficiently valued within museums and academia? Anthropologists working as museum curators are supposed to do both practical museum work and participate in academic anthropology, but it seems that it can be difficult to do it all well—and academia measures productivity firstly by number of published articles. NMNH is both a world-class museum and research institution. It requires that its curators publish a minimum of journal articles per year and keep a special eye on the young and new in tenure-track positions. When it also is the new generation of curators who are the most enthusiastic about collaboration projects like Recovering Voices it can become too much work on the same shoulders and slow down the project process. A related problem to this is the difference between anthropology and the “harder” natural sciences within NMNH. Recovering Voices is a multi-disciplinary project trying to establish new connections not only between the museums and source communities, but also between different NMNH disciplines like botany, geology, zoology, paleontology and astronomy. Although many natural scientists work in source communities the collecting of for instance soils samples and plants does not necessitate the same kind of contact as anthropological fieldwork and natural scientists do not seem to feel the same moral obligation towards their source communities.
Is the difference between the “real” and the “virtual” a useful question? One of my initial questions was how people in source communities feel the difference between seeing museum objects online versus in the museum. It became difficult even to pose because it felt like asking if they accepted “virtual repatriation” of their heritage, a concept already so contested that I wanted to avoid it and all the related difficult questions of legal and moral ownership. The ones in Anchorage who I did ask about it confirmed my feeling that repatriation can only be physical and that to see an object of your ancestors face to face so to speak is a much more powerful experience than the online access can offer. Walter Benjamin still seems to be right: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1968:220). That being said, the Alaska Natives I met and others I read about (see Fienup-Riordan) seemed more grateful being able to see the heritage of their ancestors again, be it in virtual or real.

That the usefulness is hard to measure doesn’t mean it’s useless. One of the curators at NMNH thinks anthropology is in a celebratory moment when it comes to the possibilities of digital collaboration projects and nobody wants to consider yet if the output is worth the input, as that would a very bad argument for funding new projects. I tried to measure the impact and use of the Sharing Knowledge site among people in source communities outside Anchorage, but found that it was very hard to get the right data and statistics. The traffic data from the Smithsonian could show that the traffic on the site is good and quite international, but they could only show the number of users in the major cities and traffic going through Internet hubs distorted the figures. Trying to reach users outside the Alaskan towns I sent out a short survey through the ANLAMS mailing list, but got only feedback from 6 persons out of a possible thousand. Though far from enough for making statistical guesses these six persons from the heritage sector in Alaska thought the Sharing Knowledge site was unknown to many potential users and could need marketing. Then as another Alaska Native said, the possibility that the Sharing Knowledge site will make just one or a few people more interested in their cultural heritage is useful enough. And as the same NMNH curator above said, that impact is difficult to measure doesn’t mean that isn’t there.

Preliminary project conclusion and work ahead: In a sense this fellowship project has become another beginning and it is difficult to give any concluding answer to the initial question of how to make digitized collections more useful. On this blog I will continue spinning the threads presented above and with time hopefully turn this report into an interesting article. In addition the fellowship has inspired me to start a collaborative project on a small collection from Rapa Nui in which all the experiences from the Smithsonian will be very useful.
References and suggested readings:


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