

Repatriation Otherwise: How Protocols of Belonging are Shifting the Museological Frame

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The museum is a frame, but not a conventional one—its edges can shift and it creates borders within borders, which can act as dividing lines between us and them, particularly when it comes to questions of ownership, rights and the rehomeing of our belongings. Here in the lands now known as Canada, when conversations first began with museums regarding the repatriation of our ancestors' bones, as well as those things that were outright stolen or sold under duress, this frame was used as the basis to refuse their return. The museum contains protocols, they said, certain conditions—like climate and storage—certain knowledge of collections management not available in home communities (be aware of the inherent bias in these statements). It is also understood that, when our belongings return, they are returned transformed—when they entered museums, they become bound by museological protocols, protocols which they then carried with them when they returned to their place of origin.

For a long time, I was interested in the excuses developed by museums as to why they can't give us our things back, even when it's clear that they shouldn't have them in the first place and acquired them through dubious means. One of the first people to try and get back the regalia and belongings from the potlatch ban—understood by some as beings, that is, things imbued with life and specific protocols of care—was Chief James Sewid. In 1967, after the initial argument that they simply be returned failed, he offered to buy them back for the same price that they were originally sold to museums. The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto argued that Sewid not only pay the purchase price of the objects, but also for the so-called “care” and restoration they underwent while in their holdings. This reiterated that these were objects transformed: they carried the context of the museums back with them when they did eventually return home, which predicated their display, their use and their care. To some, even in their return, they seemed homesick—stuck, as it were, between worlds.

Some of these returns predicated that a form of museum be built to enable their return—this is how U'Mista in Alert Bay on a small island on the West Coast of Canada was built. And while it adheres to some of the protocols of the museum, the community has declared it a cultural center instead. They refuse the term “museum” even in the name. Other excuses given to evade repatriation are that the belongings have become poisoned—sickened by the treatment of museums, which would douse them with arsenic when they entered their holdings—and now they can't come home because they are toxic. Another, more complex narrative of refusal is based on sickness and infection (especially telling in a time of global pandemic)—the idea that belongings may carry with them very old diseases that we no longer have immunities for—that if they return, they will make us sick. Colonial infection used as an excuse to keep those things that are not rightfully theirs; the irony in this excuse seems lost on them. Our belongings have now become their wealth and many don't yet see value in their return.

I am beginning to think of the concept of *repatriation otherwise*, the idea that perhaps we have become too focused on the return of our things (that this is yet another colonial trap), and that perhaps our frame of reference is too predicated on the colonial protocols of the museum instead of our own protocols and the protocols of the belonging itself—not artifacts, never artifacts and not objects either. These are things with agency, these are our cultural belongings. Perhaps the focus does not always need to be on their return, but on finding other ways of being with them, of making them a part of us, of our bodies, of our communities. Is this also a part of restoration and repair? In this way, repatriation begins to lose some of its fixity, it becomes more malleable, something that we can shape for our own uses and our own ends as Indigenous people.

Here I am thinking of those who mobilize the potential of embodying a belonging as a form of bringing it closer to home. The artist Tanya Lukin Linklater and her collaborators set this in motion recently. Lukin Linklater did this by first making a link between the absent body that a gutskin parka was made for and her own. Titled *We Wear One Another*, this work was performed with the parka itself, the Apache violinist Laura Ortman and the dancers Ceinwen Gobert and Danah Rosales. Through her extended engagement, and the bodies that it came into dialogue with, new choreographies, new music, new songs were enabled. The first question that the artist asked was: How could the parka itself become a score for new choreographies?

This parka travelled from the Manitoba Museum to the Agnes Etherington Art Gallery in Kingston, Ontario, but before it made the journey, Lukin Linklater wanted to visit with it. By visiting with it, she was in proximity with it, she got to know it, she shared an intimacy with something made

for and by the hands of her ancestors. She did this by gaining knowledge of the parka on its own terms. This parka, made from dried, stitched seal gut, was made for a particular person, to fit their shoulders, to fit over the shape of their head, to fit snugly around their neck, to keep out icy waters. It was sewn for the width of their torso, for the length of their arms. Every stitch was made carefully so that the garment was waterproof, as these kinds of parkas are worn when out at sea in a kayak, the waist attached to the boat to protect the paddler. The parka is a trace of them because it was a part of them.

While at the Manitoba Museum, Tanya learned as much as she could about the migration of this cultural belonging, about how the parka came to be in their holdings. These histories that are layered onto these belongings when they come into the museum are often fragmented, filled with gaps and silences. More often than not, more is known about their collectors (mainly white men) than the names of those who made the pieces and the names of those they were made for. By simply being with this belonging, was it possible to amend some of these silences and gaps in knowledge and their attendant hierarchies?

For Lukin Linklater's collaborative work, which formed part of a travelling exhibition titled *Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts*, she asked the parka for permission to travel from Manitoba to Kingston (a journey of 2,279 kilometers). When it was shown in Kingston, she didn't want to replicate the usual museological frame—to place it on an armature that approximates the body—instead placing it face-up on a custom platform, its sides painted a shiny copper. There the parka became the impetus for bodies that danced and, as they danced, the sound of electric violin pierced the air.

Through creating a new process of being with an older object, one that had languished in storage at a museum, Lukin Linklater set in motion another set of protocols for performing repatriation otherwise. She did this by first visiting and taking the time to get acquainted with this particular belonging, then, through a series of what she calls "open rehearsals," it was embodied both by the dancers and through the strings of Laura Ortman's violin. It was through this proximity that she produced a new relationship with the belonging, an element that is an integral part of the repair of colonial violence that was predicated on the material dispossession of Indigenous people. I can imagine that, when the parka was returned to the Manitoba Museum, a place of permanent displacement, it returned an object transformed.