

Visiting with the Ancestors: Blackfoot Shirts in Museum Spaces.* Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown. Edmonton, AB: AU Press, Athabasca University, 2015. 218 pp.

Jeffrey Anderson

Visiting with the Ancestors reticulates diverse narratives and images about the return visit in 2010 of five early nineteenth century Blackfoot shirts to their home peoples of Alberta and Montana after nearly 170 years of separation. Acquired in 1841 by Edward Hopkins and George Simpson, two representatives of the Hudson Bay Company, the shirts found their way into the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England. The authors were major organizers in a complex and engaging project to facilitate the temporary return of the shirts and provide access for elders, scholars, educators, artists, and students. Initially proposed by two Blackfoot scholars, Andy Blackwater and Frank Weasel Head, the project generated collaboration with a host of community members, nation leaders, museum staff, and funding sources. The resulting Blackfoot Shirts Project included exhibitions and associated workshops at the Glenbow and Galt museums. The project as described is a model that other museums and communities can follow for repatriation in a meaningful, holistic, and adaptive way, especially those involving returns or visits of artifacts from European museums, most of which are still new to this process. The book reveals the ways that collaboration is less about knowledge or culture in the abstract and more about bringing people, objects, and knowledge together into a meaningful social process of talking, thinking, sensing, and sharing while respecting cultural boundaries and flowing through the tensions, questions, and contradictions that often arise in such encounters.

Over the past three decades permanent or temporary returns of museum artifacts have created points of knowledge exchange on two levels: first, between holding institutions and indigenous peoples and, second, between “ancestors” and contemporary indigenous peoples. This work reveals how “culture” itself is created, invented, questioned, and revitalized on both levels of these exchanges. Returns from European holdings and temporary returns offer new bridges for such generative exchanges. Museums have redefined their knowledge, aims, and engagement while indigenous communities have regained access not only to static objects but also to the vitalities and knowledge of their ancestors. This work makes a strong argument for the fact that it is not enough just to “decolonize” objects and knowledge by ruthlessly negating or revising past or present forms of distortion. Rather, moving beyond critique toward reconciliation happens through the formation of new ways of knowing, seeing, touching, and using artifacts collected in the past and left sequestered and lifeless too long in museum display cases or hidden collections.

The two main audiences for the book, as the authors assert, are Blackfoot people and “professionals and students of museum studies and museum anthropology” (12). For the former it aims to provide connective historical and cultural contexts about the shirts, the process of their return, and ways of engaging objects in local education, arts, and cultural rediscovery. For the latter it seeks to serve as a case study for others to follow and critically examine. The work is thus written in an accessible style without burdensome jargon or critical theoretical reflections. For anthropologists and indigenous studies scholars, the critical and theoretical concerns are left

* This editorially reviewed contribution was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on August 28, 2017. The work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

to the reader to generate. The conspicuously weakest voice is the position of past and present anthropology on Blackfoot shirts, Plains art in general, and the whole process of repatriation. The volume draws on some of the ethnographic and ethnohistorical record, but many other existing sources are conspicuously absent. Further, few of those sources were apparently used in meetings and exchanges with Blackfoot people. While there is little direct evidence about the meaning, sources, acquisition, and makers of the five shirts themselves, there is a substantially larger body of recorded evidence to contextualize the shirts in Blackfoot, as well as a stock of knowledge about Plains, culture, and history for comparative analysis.

The first four chapters briefly offer background for, respectively, the indigenous mythical narrative about origins of hairlock shirts, which pertains to three of the shirts in the project, the past and current sociocultural landscape of Blackfoot society and culture, the general context of the fur trade on the Northern Plains, and the possible meanings and social relations surrounding the gift of the shirts in 1841. Throughout the first part of the text narratives from contemporary Blackfoot perspectives are inserted in the margins or embedded in the main text, but those narratives become the strongest voices by the closing chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 10 offers a brief response to frequently asked questions about the shirts and the project, such as who made the shirts, what the designs mean, what materials compose them, why they cannot remain permanently, and many more.

At the center of the project is the complex issue of gaps in the existing knowledge, identifying both those that the project and the text can perhaps fill and those that they cannot. On key points, the discussion often raises possible interpretations to fill those gaps, most of which are clear, but a number of which remain dangling, begging for elaboration and evidence. For example, according to the authors there is no direct archival evidence from Fort Edmonton, where the shirts were acquired, to explain what actually happened in 1841 (35). Without elaborating, the chapter on the historical context pans out to a general statement about the “the long history of difficult relationships between Blackfoot people and fur traders” (87). Later, the text alludes to the exchange of such gifts as “a demonstration of goodwill and mutual respect” (66), often involving cloth coats offered by traders or collectors, and, further, that it is possible that “the shirts in the Hopkins collection were a formal diplomatic gift presented for political reasons” (84). Other possibilities are not considered, such as a simple purchase of the shirts for trade goods, a form quite common in such encounters. There is also a brief, and somewhat indifferent discussion of the path the shirts followed through the home of the Hopkins family to the Pitt Rivers Museum.

While the many voices in the work are at times brought into dialogue, argumentation among competing voices in the project is not addressed. This work draws attention to but hesitates to delve into the tensions or contradictions between the ways Blackfoot people and non-Indian professionals attribute meaning and value to the shirts, the Blackfoot Shirts Project, and the book itself. There are also clear differences of opinion among Blackfoot interpreters. While clearly present, the description does not delve into the tensions within each side of the cultural binary or among Blackfoot people themselves. Moreover, how tensions and differences were negotiated as the project emerged is not fully articulated.

While never really resolving these tensions, which no such collaboration can ever hope to do, the last three chapters do foreground the prolific power of dialogue for exchanging knowledge and aims, following Blackfoot calls, not to write a book that answers all questions. This book shows

that only in dialogue and by realizing that all narratives are dialogical can the fluidity perspectives on “culture” be rendered salient, mobile, and open. The project generated successful engagement through outgrowths of many other initiatives in cultural education, art, discourse, and other Blackfoot community contexts. Such encounters perhaps cannot indeed be structured in advance or overly analyzed as such afterward. This is new, creative, and prolific terrain for both museums and indigenous communities alike that reveals the ways knowledge is indeed socially created.

Jeffrey Anderson is Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He is the author of Arapaho Women’s Quillwork: Motion, Life, and Creativity (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), One Hundred Years of Old Man Sage: An Arapaho Life Story (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, and The Four Hills of Life: Northern Arapaho Knowledge and Life Movement (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

<https://doi.org/10.14434/mar.v12i1.24331>