

# 16

## ON NOT LOOKING Economies of Visuality in Digital Museums

*Kimberly Christen*

In recent years there has been an exponential growth of online exhibits, digital repositories, and online databases by international institutions, small communities, national repositories, and individuals alike. Part of this expansion comes from the relatively low cost of digital technologies required to produce and curate digital exhibits, while another cause is a general shift in the way many people see their role in narrating their lives. At the same time, however, a global movement by indigenous peoples to redress erasures of the past and open the museum to a range of stakeholders, supported by museum and library professionals, has resulted in a new climate for curation in general and for digital displays more particularly. The advent of digital collections, virtual exhibits, and online databases has dovetailed with the rise of collaborative and community curation models championed since the mid-1990s. On the one hand, the online space seems perfectly suited to rotating displays, co-curated projects, and crowdsourced narration; on the other hand, the Internet also allows for the misuse and unanticipated circulation and distribution of materials that may formerly have been sheltered in museums. This overlap of a newly framed politics of circulation concerning digital cultural materials and a global indigenous movement focused on ethical collecting and display practices warrants a closer look at a number of widely shared assumptions about the digital landscape.

In their recent book, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2009) argue that there is an “economy of looking” – whether tacit or explicit – in all cultural practices from the design of museum exhibits to the creation of educational curriculum to everyday practices of engagement. For museum studies scholars, curators, and museum specialists to come to terms with this economy of looking, we need to take seriously the divergent knowledge systems that place emphasis elsewhere – systems that ask us to look

*differently or not look* at all. It is one thing to exhibit cultural difference; it is another to alter museum display practices, question modes of authoring, and/or redefine collecting priorities based on systems of accountability that define an ethical field of visuality based on *not looking*. By calling attention to the act of looking itself, I aim to undo the notion of looking as a benign, natural, reflexive act and redirect our attention to understanding looking as a social and ethical stance deeply embedded in cultural assumptions and political structures. In this chapter, I examine the digital museum landscape by exploring museum practices including virtual exhibitions, online databases, and web portals. My focus is on projects that compel us to think differently about practices of looking and the production of knowledge, access, and authority. To that end I look closely at three cases studies involving the Warumungu Aboriginal community in the Central Desert of Australia, the Inuvialuit peoples of the Western Canadian Arctic, and Winnipeg artist Kevin Lee Burton based in Northern Canada. These projects address head-on the difficult issues about access, identity, and authority through digital spaces that are imbued with local sensibilities and diverse notions of looking. Specifically, I ask how an emergent economy of looking might be defined if museum professionals and scholars were to grapple openly with the ethics of looking and an economy of visual accountability across diverse cultures and at the intersection of a global shift in indigenous museological politics.

## **To look or not to look?**

Colloquially we link looking and knowledge acquisition, as expressed in the idea that “seeing is believing.” This common sentiment suggests that, if we look hard enough we can see clearly, without distraction or deflection. Relatedly, this idea assumes that by looking into someone’s eyes we can see their true intentions. Not only knowledge acquisition, but also the recognition of truth and the proposition of love, are all predicated on the act of looking. Within museums and museum studies, looking is taken for granted. People come to museums to look and learn and scholars look in order to explain and analyze. The curators of the Smithsonian’s “click! Photography Changes Everything” initiative connect the institution’s origins with the rise of photography, arguing that “Photography brought the faraway near and made visible the previously invisible.” Furthermore they define this act of looking as part of our collective national “visual literacy,” stating that, “At the Smithsonian we believe that being familiar with an image’s context is an important part of understanding its meaning. We also believe that being culturally literate requires you to use the visual language of photography in an active, critical and creative way.”<sup>1</sup> The act of looking – via photographic technology and museum display – is privileged as a way to both gain knowledge and be a culturally literate citizen. The Smithsonian Photography Initiative comfortably links knowledge acquisition, civic responsibility, and the photographic gaze.

Photography is a means to an end, a technological advance that has, in the curators' words, "made visible the previously invisible." One could ask, of course, who or what is made visible by photographic practices. In the early nineteenth century photos the Smithsonian project references, many Native peoples were rendered invisible through the photographic gaze that produced them for the American imagination as primitive, less than human objects of curiosity. Their names were erased or never cataloged; their "authentic" poses were staged, and the histories of their displacement were marginalized through the spectacle of exhibit. Today many of those same indigenous communities are building their own archives, museums, and cultural centers as part of a political movement to renarrate their histories and define the processes and practices of looking and being seen within their own cultural frameworks and colonial histories.

The narrative frame of the "click!" project is helpful to highlight the normative view of looking practices: what we are asked to look at and who is hailed in the practices of looking. In fact, in her essay on the "click!" website, Haidy Geismar (2009) questions the normative connection of photography and looking by asking, "But what if a starting point for thinking about photography was to consider the very right to look as being a problem?" Geismar's question alerts us to the varied economies of looking that are often marginalized or erased in museums. Tacit assumptions about the act of looking and the cultural practice of exhibiting in particular include the idea that where we place our gaze works to unveil or make visible something that was previously unknown; that technology can aid in and amplify our viewing practices, making them more complete; and that practices of looking are necessary components of knowledge acquisition and cultural literacy.

In Australia, Aboriginal practices of masking, deleting, defaming, and hiding images, objects, and artifacts based on local cultural protocols disrupt the act of looking and the privileging of display as a precursor to knowledge acquisition. Since the 1970s museum practices have been increasingly altered by the inclusion of indigenous perspectives and practices. In settler nations such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand many museums have signed memorandums of understandings (MOUs) with indigenous communities, reclassified materials, and produced innovative exhibitions through both long- and short-term collaborations and renegotiated policies (Brown 2009; Boast 2011). These processes of collaboration, of giving back and co-curating exhibits, have, as Geismar suggests, paved the way for "authority and access" to be renegotiated within the museum space (Geismar 2009; Geismar and Mohns 2011). While it may have been convenient once to believe that engaging with indigenous communities meant simply *adding in* their voices to exhibit spaces, what has actually taken place since the mid-1990s has been a shift in the way exhibition, display, and curation are *imagined and practiced*. Robin Boast laments the adoption of collaborative approaches that have erased awareness of the structural inequalities built into museum collecting, design, and display practices. Boast shows that, since the early 1990s, notions of indigenous empowerment, collaboration, and consultation have all

been part and parcel of museum operations, particularly for anthropology and/or ethnographic museums. He suggests further that, while there has been a “general optimism about the nature of new collaborative approaches to representation in museums” (Boast 2011, 59) this adopted strategy continues to downplay the inevitable institutional dominance of museums as part of a neocolonial space. While pessimistic, perhaps, Boast ends with a challenge:

Museums of the 21st century must confront this deeper neocolonial legacy. This is not only possible but, I would argue, could renovate the museum into an institution that supported the enrichment, rather than authorization, of collections. To do this, however, requires museums to learn to let go of their resources, even at times of the objects, for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control. (2011, 67)

Taking up Boast’s call, I examine several projects that have attempted to redefine the museum space by using digital technologies to integrate indigenous cultural, social, and ethical systems into the very core practices of display, curation, and the reuse of objects and knowledge for multiple audiences. These projects challenge institutional control and core museological philosophies of sole authorial control, unique expert voices, and the external structure of collecting that might well fit Boast’s criteria for a fully postcolonial twenty-first-century museum model, one digital artifact at a time.

## Not looking

It is now routine throughout Australia for books, television programs, websites, and museum displays to be accompanied by a warning to potential viewers that images of deceased people and/or sacred objects may be found within their products. These warnings simultaneously acknowledge the power of visuality and the existence of multiple visual economies. Aboriginal sensibilities place value on not looking as a form of acknowledgment and obligation between kin to maintain their cultural knowledge and practices (Myers 2005; Christen 2009). Thus these warnings may deflect Aboriginal protocols for not viewing by allowing others to view, to look, to engage, where Aboriginal people might prefer they did not. When I interviewed a visual designer doing work for many Aboriginal exhibits in Australian museums, she told me that she had seen photos of permanent displays that had been defaced, pulled down, or covered up by Aboriginal people who took exception to any display of their sacred materials or deceased relatives. In the remote town of Tennant Creek, Northern Territory, Australia, where I worked with the Warumungu Aboriginal community to aid in the development of their displays at the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Culture Centre, when elders passed away images were masked and the video production containing their images and voices were stopped for months at a time. Similarly, when I was at the visitors’ center near

Uluru in 2003, ragged-edge cardboard and duct tape covered the images of elders who had recently passed away. Pressed onto the glass displays, these makeshift covers announced a different set of looking practices. Another designer told me that she stopped using detachable letters in Aboriginal displays because they were routinely dismantled when a community member passed away; she found using permanent etched-in lettering was more conducive to her museum design aesthetic.

While museums may make *accommodations* for Aboriginal cultural protocols based in their own looking practices, more needs to be done to respect these economies of looking and the cultural and ethical concerns they represent in permanent ways. Acknowledging protocols through warnings and temporary displays, then working around these ethical systems with design structures and permanent displays, undermines the very ethical systems indigenous communities wish to highlight and make permanent across spaces. As I was working with the Warumungu community, many issues came up surrounding the display of their cultural materials and images within the museum and online (Figure 16.1).



**FIGURE 16.1** Three generations of Warumungu women watching and editing videos for inclusion on the Digital Dynamics Across Cultures (DDAC) website in Tennant Creek, NT, Australia, May 2005: (left to right) Sharnie Graham, Edith Nakkamarra Graham, and Linda Namikili Graham.

Photo: Kimberly Christen.

One of the elders working on the project saw both the potential and the pitfalls of the Internet: he reasoned that, if everyone could see, then why not use the medium as the message itself? Why not use a web-based display to educate the public about Aboriginal notions of knowledge circulation based in different ways and parameters for looking? The result of this query was the Digital Dynamics Across Cultures (DDAC) website.<sup>2</sup> The site was a collaborative production between Warumungu community members including Trisha Narrurlu Frank, Michael Jampin Jones, Judy Nakkamarra Nixon, Peggy Napangardi Jones, Lindy Brodie, Rose Namikili Graham, Junior Juppurla Frank, Dianne Nampin Stokes, Edith Nakkamarra Graham, and the University of Southern California's *Vectors* online journal, Alex Ceglia, Chris Cooney, Craig Dietrich, and myself to produce both a critique of standard online exhibit-viewing practices and an alternative viewing experience based in a set of local indigenous protocols for the circulation of cultural knowledge and materials.

The DDAC leveraged the extensive collection of digital photographs, videos, and audio that I had amassed over 10 years of fieldwork with community members, using them to educate viewers, not about Warumungu culture writ large, but about Warumungu cultural protocols surrounding the viewing, circulation, and reproduction of their cultural materials and knowledge. For the Warumungu, like many Aboriginal people, all stories are placed and all places have stories. The opening page of the DDAC site is thus a visual representation of Warumungu homelands. This map is not a topographical depiction of Warumungu country and sites, but an artistic rendering of Warumungu land produced by Rose Namakili Graham, one of our Warumungu collaborators (Figure 16.2). Namikili's circular images draw in viewers to the connectedness between places on the land, people, and ancestors without divulging the actual location of sacred sites. Viewers must enter the site through a place – there is no way to be placeless. Making country the main hub of the online experience highlights the cultural view held by many Warumungu community members that land is the basis for action, human agency, and reciprocal knowledge relations. One must know and be accountable to both people and places. Knowledge flows in many directions and unites people, land, and ancestors in an ongoing dialogue and within relationships based on obligations to act (Myers 2002; Christen 2009). For example, people are related to the countries on which they were both conceived and born; they, along with their kin, have mutual and enduring obligations to maintain these areas. People learn proper rituals as they grow and mature and no one individual or group within the larger community holds all the knowledge for one place. Instead, this is a complimentary system in which all responsible members of the community must act and interact to ensure the reproduction of culture and the circulation of knowledge. Even so, places can die and people can lose knowledge. One way to guard against this process of loss is to actively maintain one's relationships with country, kin, and ancestors through one's ritual obligations and daily actions.

The map on the DDAC main page invites users to enter the site through discrete places. As viewers click on the circles and dots they chart their own path across the





**FIGURE 16.3** In physical museum spaces Aboriginal community members often use masking tape, duct tape, or cardboard to cover images of the deceased. The design team for the DDAC website recreated this same use in the online space (web page accessed April 20, 2008).

and thereby ensuring the reproduction of cultural knowledge and practices and the continual creation of new knowledge.

Once users of the DDAC site are halted from their routine Internet searching practices, they are given the opportunity to learn more by clicking on explanations for these protocols. Warumungu community members drew, animated, and narrated the cultural protocol pop-ups that function as explanations, not of “errors,” but of a different knowledge system all together, one where not looking is privileged as the proper way to engage with some materials and places. There are nine protocols that highlight a system of knowledge reciprocity and collaboration that rests on fundamental relationships between people, places, and ancestors. We designed the DDAC site in part to challenge the assumption that online searches are neutral, value-free, or somehow natural practices. Although upload practices are often rendered invisible by the dominant metaphors shaping Internet search, it is the case that everything one “finds” online was put there by someone else, and not necessarily someone with the authority to do so. It is common to find indigenous cultural materials displayed online

without consent or attribution and in direct conflict with local protocols for the circulation of cultural material. Undoing the search and discovery metaphors that define everyday Internet use is a challenge.

In his book *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, John Battelle chronicles the cultural rise of the seemingly mundane practice of search:

In the past few years, search has become a universally understood method of navigating our information universe: much as the Windows interface defined our interactions with the personal computer, search defines our interactions with the Internet. Put a search box in front of just about anyone, and he'll know what to do with it. And the aggregate of all those searches, it turns out, is knowable: it constitutes the database of intensions. (2005, 4)

Battelle shows that in the online information/access culture, "as surfers moved from a stance of exploration to expectation, search as a navigational metaphor began to make more sense" (2005, 61). While search became a daily activity for a large portion of the developed world, Google leveraged this shifting cultural practice and the technological capacity to index and archive web pages, rank them, and present them to Internet users in a speedy and user-friendly interface. Google's search capacity redefined the expectations and the experience of Internet users such that search and find has become naturalized and linked, without question, to knowledge acquisition.

Search, in these cases, facilitates the accrual of information at the same time as it reinforces the discursive framing of information as discrete bundles of knowledge waiting to be found, cataloged, dissected, and played with. Google is not shy about its claims for search. In its online mission statement it declares "Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."<sup>3</sup> Google cofounders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, have made their goals clear. Page announced that "Only a fraction of the world's information is indexed on our computers. We are continually working on new ways to index more," while Brin links their mission to universalize and catalog to a divine project: "The perfect search engine would be like the mind of God" (Ferguson 2005). Relatedly, Kieran Healy argues that with the popularity of services like Napster (and presumably now iTunes), there has been a shift from "the idea that access ought to be free" to the expectation "that it ought to be complete" (Healy 2002, 490). What Healy and Brin both underscore is the dominant assumption that content online should be complete and accessible to all. Expedient search functionality, along with a now well-entrenched remix mashup Web 2.0 user-generated content culture, has produced a flat debate about access that denies alternative views and instead defaults to celebrating openness (Christen 2005; Myers 2005; Seeger 2005). Within museums, the standard procedure to privilege openness is compounded by institutional mandates to serve

an undifferentiated public. The DDAC site intervenes in these debates by engaging users on the Internet and asking them to think differently; to not look; to engage through and learn about the cultural information systems other than those dominated by the search and discover paradigms. Through the site's interface it questions the naturalization of the intimate link between access and knowledge and asks viewers instead to examine their own notions of knowledge circulation.

The DDAC site is an experimental visual exhibition that uses the Internet and the technologies that allow for rapid circulation and endless reproduction to make an argument for *less circulation, limited use, and controlled access*. While the DDAC website is an expression of a Warumungu visual economy, it also points to the practices of display and the contours of access that define an emergent indigenous visual landscape. Taking the DDAC site one step further, Warumungu community members working at the Nyinkka Nyunyu Art and Culture Centre and I worked over several years to develop a stand-alone browser-based digital archive that supported their local cultural protocols about the circulation, sharing, and reproduction of cultural materials and knowledge. The Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive, launched in 2007, integrated the expressed needs of Warumungu community members to be able to manage content within a reciprocal and complimentary kinship system that already worked offline in face-to-face interactions and negotiations about the proper circulation routes for and uses of cultural objects, knowledge, and other resources (Christen 2008; 2012). The archive's interface and internal architecture allows individual users to decide the levels of access and use of their materials. The partial showing, managed offline with duct tape and cardboard and then mirrored online on the DDAC site, is embedded into the code of the Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive such that users can easily decide what images, songs, texts, or video can be viewed, listened to, or reproduced and by whom.

This type of access management allows community members to maintain important cultural codes while also taking advantage of the digital technologies affordances. Community members can narrate content, adding layers of meaning to previously undocumented content and, for communities where displacement and dispossession are part of their colonial past, the Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive's interface allows them to dynamically add comments as text, audio, or video to enhance their shared community histories and build a narrative of their own choosing from the previously documented threads of their lives. Much more than a place to store materials, the archive highlights the dynamism of cultural creation and the need for collections to be both accessible and managed in culturally responsive ways (Christen 2008; Srinivasan et al. 2010; Geismar and Mohns 2011). Display is never neutral. The DDAC site, the Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive, and the new Mukurtu CMS ([www.mukurtu.org](http://www.mukurtu.org)) open source platform all challenge dominant display modes and challenge the notion that seeing is believing. Digitizing content is not the central challenge for museums that wish to

display their collections online. Instead, the emphasis must be on the politics of display and the parameters of access, allowing for wholly different display practices including not displaying at all. The digital museum – in all its manifestations – is still emerging out of decades of activism, shifting policies, and negotiated spaces. Vermeulen and Pilcher suggest that “online museums bring not only the possibility of undermining the ahistorical and unassailable voice to be found in a range of cultural expressions, but also a particularly effective chance to make explicit an engagement with it by indigenous voices” (2009, 68). As curators, researchers, and indigenous peoples open the digital space to divergent visual economies, we must also rethink fundamental notions of how collections are managed, how narrative authority is shaped, and the place of institutional control in management and design efforts (Srinivasan et al. 2010; Christen 2011; Geismar and Mohns 2011).

### **Access and authority: Visuality and textuality**

In 2009 members from the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre and the wider Inuvialuit community embarked on a partnership with the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History and several scholars to facilitate greater access to the rather large, but not widely known, MacFarlane Collection held at the Smithsonian. The collection contains close to five thousand natural history specimens, and some three hundred cultural objects collected by Roderick MacFarlane, a non-Native trader stationed near the Anderson River fur trade post. MacFarlane’s collection, although known to some Inuvialuit community members, has to date been viewed by very few community members or scholars. The goal of the trip to the Smithsonian was to reunite the collections with the source community to determine how best to handle access and display of the materials locally (Lyons et al. 2011) (Figure 16.4). When the Inuvialuit community members arrived in Washington, DC, they were not disappointed. In the Inuvialuit-produced documentary, *A Case of Access*, community members are openly moved by seeing, touching, and talking about the objects in the collection.

The documentary’s opening scene shows several community members walking the streets near the museum and boarding a tourist bus as the driver announces that “Christopher Columbus discovered the new world ... the natives were called Indians.” Cutting to shots of the Inuvialuit “tourists,” the documentary frames this particular “case of access” within the legacy of colonialism, dispossession, and displacement that inevitably links Native communities and museums in current relationships not necessarily of their choosing, but in ones of necessity, nonetheless. Choosing to open the documentary with an anchor in ongoing colonial narratives, the Inuvialuit producers remind us that contemporary museological projects are never wholly disconnected from colonial collecting origins that gave rise to the current collaborative moment.



**FIGURE 16.4** Members of the Inuvialuit Living History Project team examine engraved wooden plaques from the National Museum of Natural History’s MacFarlane Collection, Smithsonian Museum Support Center, 2009: (left to right) Mervin Joe, James Pokiak, Albert Elias, Catherine Cockney, Karis Gruben, Freda Raddi, David Stewart, Natasha Lyons. Photo: Kate Hennessy.

In the documentary, community members and curators discuss the reconnection of the MacFarlane Collection with the Inuvialuit. Smithsonian curator Stephen Loring described the project from the museum’s perspective:

What is so exciting about this project is that for many, many years these collections that we have[,] these anthropology collections, these ethnographic collections were the purview of a few scientists, researchers, archaeologists[,] anthropologists, they would come, they would look at a few things[,] they might take pictures of them[,] they might write an article about them. But since about 1995 there has been a real revolution in museum studies. For so many years the museum has felt they owned these things and I suppose in some way we do, but more and more in this climate of repatriation is one that is exploring ways like this group[’]s travel here to make this material more broadly known and more accessible.

Loring echoed the sentiment of the Inuvialuit who were able to make the trip to DC, emphasizing the need to bring the narrative side of the collection back home to the community. Natasha Lyons, one of the researchers accompanying the Inuvialuit, described the necessity to “connect to the past as a source of pride in the present” for the community members. Similarly, Inuvialuit community member, James Pokiak



FIGURE 16.5 Homepage of the Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait / Inuvialuit Living History website (accessed August 30, 2012).

acknowledged that “the most important part is that we now have an avenue and a way to access these things to be shown to our people in our area.”<sup>4</sup> Although access is significant, the ability to view these objects within an Inuvialuit visual economy is what makes the access complete and comprehensible. Simply having the objects digitized and displayed on the Smithsonian website was not enough; the delegation wanted to bring the collection home digitally and to frame it within their own visual economy. While some of the physical objects may one day be part of a long-term loan project from the National Museum of Natural History, the immediate focus is on making the collection not only accessible but, more importantly, visually knowable by the community by giving community members the editorial controls to define and narrate the objects that hold their histories and knowledges.

The result of this collaboration is the Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait / Inuvialuit Living History, an evolving website and online exhibit (Hennessy et al. 2012). Everyone involved in the effort wanted to create a “living website,” a space where Inuvialuit peoples felt comfortable and a dynamic platform for “ongoing activities and educational programs for outreach” (Figure 16.5). As in the Warumungu example, access to the MacFarlane Collection for a diverse range of Inuvialuit community members and the general public was complemented by making Inuvialuit concerns for representational control central to the process. Specifically, the group collaborated in order to design the “website to provide a view into the dynamic relationship between Inuvialuit peoples and the MacFarlane Collection, and to promote the collection as a place for learning and teaching” (Lyons et al. 2011, 12).

Because the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History was already a part of the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN), an online research hub housed at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, they could more easily and quickly share digital content and metadata with the Inuvialuit. The RRN allows indigenous communities to access the collections of many institutions through an easy-to-use interface that assembles content and metadata and aggregates information on multiple collections in one space. As a virtual research space, the RRN promotes the sharing of ideas between researchers and indigenous communities. It encourages dialogue and flattens the once hierarchical model of the curatorial voice by allowing multiple voices to exist in the same narrative space. Notably, the RRN "emerged from the desire of all participants to base the project on the principles of respect for the originating communities' different knowledge and value systems as well as for the partner museums" (Rowley et al. 2010, 15). Because "intangible heritage – that is narrative, stories, and memories of human engagements with objects – is increasingly valued as an alternative source of authority and enrichment for museums,"<sup>5</sup> these institutions have an incentive to mine the opportunities afforded by new digital technologies to expand nonvisual and material components of exhibits built collaboratively in virtual space.

To produce the Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait website, the team used the "RRN's Application Programming Interface (API) to curate and remediate object records from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History's MacFarlane Collection" in order to "reconnect the collection to intangible knowledge, local cultural practices, and revitalization initiatives" (Hennessy et al. 2012, 3). The RRN's API is an "interface that simplifies automated access to its publicly available digital collections records. This enables developers to make use of those records in new works and applications." Using cutting-edge technologies, the team hoped to promote not just access, nor even total access, but both access and narrative authority based on Inuvialuit needs and understandings. That is, while the API promotes wider access to collections generally, "it also represents an opportunity for originating communities to recontextualize their cultural heritage in new digital forms, reclaiming control over their representation of history and culture" (Hennessy et al. 2012, 6). Repurposing a tool that is generally thought of as a way to open up or give away collections and metadata, the RRN's API was leveraged to create a space for renarration and defined use by the Inuvialuit to create a very local content for the collection. The design of the site and the visual display of the materials were as central to the process as defining the content.

Visually the site brings together Inuvialuit objects with Inuvialuit people and voices. When viewing an object on the screen, one sees images of Inuvialuit community members, hears their voices, and can read their text. Nowhere are the objects displaced from that very local context. Looking at the Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait website, one is struck first by its inclusion of a range of Inuvialuit perspectives. From the main page to the "MacFarlane Collection," "Conversations," and "Learn" pages, at every click one is deeply engaged with and by Inuvialuit

community members young, old, male, and female. In addition to its visually pleasing aesthetic, the site makes a bold yet visually minimalist statement about Inuvialuit *living* history. On the “Learn” page, for example, one can explore Inuvialuit sewing by looking at some of the clothes from the MacFarlane Collection, reading about how the clothes were made and used, and by following premade patterns and lesson plans to make clothes as they were previously made. Catherine Cockney from the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre provided an overview of the sewing section and its goals:

While at the Smithsonian Institution, the group had the pleasure of examining a number of clothing items made by our ancestors. What is unique about the clothing is that since they were made in the 1800s, they are *adjgaat ingilraanittat*, *kamngit ingilraanittat* and *atigit ingilraanittat* or “real, traditional clothing” (translation by Beverly Amos), including Inuvialuit gloves, mukluks and parkas! We were fortunate to have Mrs. Freda Raddi on the trip. She is an expert seamstress, using the skills she learned from her mother. Freda immediately put her knowledge to work by making patterns of the clothing out of paper and cloth. Freda took great pride in her role, as she knew that the clothing is ancient and that there are very few examples of this style of clothing. One of the objectives of the project is to take the information and share with all Inuvialuit. Seamstress Heather Scott is currently making patterns of several of the skin clothing pieces to share with Inuvialuit seamstresses. By making clothing patterns and examining the stitching and decorations used in the past, we are able to continue to live and share our traditional Inuvialuit heritage.<sup>6</sup>

The process of recontextualizing the MacFarlane Collection began with virtually returning the objects to the community for insertion into their own sense of what it means to be Inuvialuit today, in the past, and in the future. As the website grows, one can imagine the “Learn” page including hunting, carving, and other aspects of life that have been brought back to the community through the reintroduction of the MacFarlane Collection.

For museum specialists, the “MacFarlane Collection” exhibit page on the site might be the most useful place to begin to reimagine curatorial roles and authorial voices. Discussing the process of resituating the collection, Kate Hennessy suggests that “the production of the virtual exhibit has been grounded in a process of re-writing curatorial descriptions of the objects, revising classificatory categories and using semantic web and tagging functions to build new relationships between objects, records and related media” (Hennessy et al. 2012, 12). Because many of the categories used to describe the objects within the collection were outdated, offensive, or misguided, the team spent a lot of time viewing the collection with a range of community members to get the most suitable terminology for an Inuvialuit audience. Searching using the “Explore by Types” tab on the collection page,<sup>7</sup> one can see the specificity of Inuvialuit conceptions: bow, comb, crooked knife, hunting call, robe, saw, snow goggle, and so on. These categories were

chosen by the Inuvialuit members of the team to best suit the searching needs of their community members, who are the main audience and user group for the site.

Similarly, the original catalog descriptions from the collection were almost all rewritten to clarify, correct, and expand the catalog record. Some records were completely rewritten, while others contain some of the original narrative descriptors from the original catalog records and are clearly marked "Information from the Smithsonian." On the Inuvialuit Pitquasiit Inuuniarutait website, the unmarked voice is that of the Inuvialuit, not the institution. When a non-Inuvialuit narrative is encountered it is clearly labeled. It is certainly the case that, "No matter how much museums allow multivocality to express itself at the level of the exhibition, it is at the level of the catalog that the enduring identity of the objects exists and it is at this level that the multivocality must be incorporated" (Srinivasan et al. 2010, 747).

In a similar way to the Mukurtu system, the recontextualizing of the MacFarlane Collection takes place at the record and item level to ensure the enduring reclassification of the object (Christen 2011). In addition, each view page has an option to "add your knowledge," giving community members and the public a way to expand the record even further. But here the interface differs from a crowdsourced understanding of knowledge collection. On the popular photosharing website Flickr, for example, the Library of Congress and other large institutions have made portions of their collections open to comments in order "to increase access to publicly-held photography collections, and to provide a way for the general public to contribute information and knowledge."<sup>8</sup> Unlike the collections from the Library of Congress viewable on the Flickr Commons, where anyone can post a comment in real time, the comments on the Inuvialuit virtual exhibit are subject to approval by an Inuvialuit committee who will "moderate, discuss and determine what should be posted on the website" (Hennessy et al. 2012, 15). While dominant Web 2.0 narratives unquestionably favor openness and heap unqualified praise on crowdsourcing as a way to democratize the web, and knowledge acquisition more generally, the recontextualization and display of indigenous materials online questions the de facto benefit of the more-is-better approach to web curation. Instead of assuming that a level playing field is either desirable or even achievable in the digital or analogue museum, indigenous curatorial practices deny both the old expert authority and the newer crowdsourced authority, opting instead for a middle ground where source communities' knowledge is privileged even while other knowledge is acknowledged and maintained (Phillips 2005; Srinivasan et al. 2010; Christen 2011).

Immediate reactions to such control mechanisms may suggest oppressive connotations of *gatekeeping*, forever excluding and denying a democratic, free, or open web. But if we halt the onslaught of utopian views of the web and instead spend a moment reflecting on the colonial history of museums, display practices, collecting models, and knowledge claims, we can, at the very least, understand why indigenous communities might want to preview comments, limit authorial voices, and/or renarrate their own collections. This reflection does not have to slip into an all-or-nothing model of curation. Michael Brown is certainly correct when he observes that "the current passion for community-controlled museology is understandable in

light of colonial history. Its insights have already injected new energy into the museum world.” From here, however, it is not inevitable that “there is now only one defensible way to deal with objects and information entrusted to them,” that is to provide “full involvement of Native communities” in the curation process as suggested by Amy Lonetree (Brown 2009, 159). Brown is right to be skeptical about just what “full” participation means, how it is put into practice, and its very real limitations in relation to resources, competing goals, and limited understandings of exhibition models. My point here is that, as scholars and interlocutors, we need not gravitate to zero sum narratives about indigenous participation within twenty-first-century museum spaces. Collaboration is always contingent; it need not be premised on the assumption of a complete or unanimous indigenous viewpoint.

When we limit ourselves to an all-or-nothing framework, we devalue what the diverse sets of indigenous communities and individuals can bring to the table and we limit ourselves and the collaborative possibilities afforded by opening up previously closed-off spaces. Many indigenous communities globally are building their own museums, cultural centers, and archives as a way to wrest power from the colonial model of museology that remained dominant in the previous century. But many more are also finding creative and negotiated models of collaboration that do not presume a level playing field. Rather, they seek to inject indigenous voices into every step of the process so as to slowly undo the grip that colonial and salvage paradigms of collecting have had on the structure of the museum itself. There is no need to presume that full involvement is achievable or that collaboration will be harmonious, unanimous, or equitable. It won't. Within any community (indigenous or not) there will be competing and often contradictory opinions and views. What is empowering about the Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait website is not that it highlights collaboration – that is admirable to be sure – but the site's move to upend the dominant museological model of the authorial voice, the uninterrupted gaze, and the silenced other. The website provides a framework for looking that resituates the authority and power to determine who is looking and what they may see. Access is both partial and part of a larger ethical system in which cultural knowledge moves, is produced, used, and altered. In a digital landscape where the “crowd” is being positioned as the best guarantee of a democratic platform, this site reminds us that crowds often miss the subtleties of multiple well-positioned sources whose lives have been altered and erased by the commitments and concerns of the dominant society.

### **“It's time to repaint that picture”**

Winnipeg artist Kevin Lee Burton's online exhibit “God's Lake Narrows” is a visually stunning, artistically arresting view of “reserve reality” in Northern Canada.<sup>9</sup> Single images of houses, isolated from their inhabitants, move across the screen one by one. It is punctuated by a minimalist narrative which directs the viewer to see something else, to look beyond our notions of reserves, poverty, Indians,

unemployment, remoteness, and solitude and see the reserve and its inhabitants anew. The main page opens with a map of Canada dotted with the three thousand-plus reserves that are scattered across its territory. Depending on your own location, the text asks you to imagine your own proximity to the northern Manitoba reserve of God's Lake Narrows. As one advances through the exhibit, the audio track of radio announcers, wood being chopped, cars driving, bingo numbers being called – the everyday, mundane sounds of reserve life – plays in the background. With each click of the mouse another single house fills the screen: snow-covered ground, brown paint, empty driveway. Punctuated by panels with sparse text: “The only people that casually go through God's Lake are here to fill the White People's Jobs; nurses, teachers, police, conservation officers.” Advance. Another apparently empty house, dotted with trash and broken furniture. The text starts to come alive, now in a bold green on a black background: “I grew up here. If you're from a reserve the houses tell you certain things. You know this person sacrificed his income for his four-wheeler and you know why his porch door is so worn and torn. If you're not from a reserve, all the houses might seem the same to you.” Empty porches, deserted swing sets, old plastic chairs.

Burton's exhibit is intensely personal and yet generalizable at the same time – his reserve life could be found on any other in Canada, the United States, or Australia. Supposed “third world” conditions right in the middle of “first world” nations; poverty at the edges of wealth; the collision of colonial pasts and a globalized present. Burton narrates the seemingly discontinuous overlap:

We've moved beyond third world conditions, but it's quite recent. If you Google God's Lake, you'll find photo montages of pristine forests and lakes. You'll also find videos of kids lip-synching to Lady Gaga, drinking, hickey-giving, and various other antics. (I think that is more about the intersection of bored teens and technology than it is about God's Lake.) I wish they'd take some of the videos down. I feel like they are misrepresenting my home town, or at least supporting the age-old prejudice of reserves as desolate places – nothin' but a cesspool of Indians. *It's time to repaint that picture.*

What might it look like for Burton to repaint that picture? For himself, for that community, for the Canadian public, for the museums that have for so long painted their own picture of indigenous peoples in Canada and elsewhere?

In quick succession Burton answers us. Splashes of color on the bland-looking reserve. We are confronted with faces full screen. We cannot *not* look. “There are different social codes,” he tells us. Pause. “Sometimes I think we would be better left alone.” More faces, old, young. Men, women, painted walls, computers, dogs, teenagers, cell phones, kids. Home. “It's not such a bad thing to live on the rez. When I was a kid I hunted for chickens or snared rabbits at lunchtime, how awesome is that? Now as a 30-something year-old gay, urbanized male that has a decent grasp of the Cree language, I give my appreciation to the fact that we were bushed for so long.” Crying babies, mothers, kids strumming guitars. “The social aspects were what sometimes made it unbearable. As a kid I didn't always fit in. I had to leave. As

shitty as it might have been at times, I realize that God's Lake is the place that has given me distinction in this world. *I'll take my blessings where I can get 'em.*"

In 25 panels and 48 lines of text Kevin Lee Burton switches the focus of reservation life and reorients the gaze. We are looking, maybe for the first time, at the reserve as a space of intimacy, rejection, social cohesion, and social isolation. Looking invites us to see what is uncomfortable for Burton as well as the non-Native majority in Canada and other settler nations still haunted by the remnants of failed "Indian policies" and postcolonial museums wrestling with just how to manage the sometimes contentious and always shifting set of engagements with indigenous communities. Burton's online exhibit takes the assumed starkness of the reserve and turns those images into a narrative of both the inhabitants of the reserve and those who just pass through, never really looking at all. He calls on us to slow down, pause, stop, and look. The gaze from the outside has been focused on solving a set of problems or defining a set of dysfunctions. In Burton's view of God's Lake Narrows, he is at the center and at the margin: an insider who didn't quite fit in, but whose life was nonetheless defined by his Native roots in God's Lake and his path from there. His minimalist use of photos and text to tell his story, set to the ambient sounds of reserve life reminds us that online exhibits can readily capture the mundane and direct attention to the very act of looking itself. Situated outside the museum walls, the narrative voice is already placed elsewhere. Burton's voice is presituated at the edges of a national space and a local place. The exhibition promotes a visual economy where the viewer and the narrator are pulled into a momentary relationship that may not obligate either party to see one story or hear one message, but that calls attention to the everyday absences in the public sphere.

I end with Burton's piece precisely because it doesn't quite fit the usual pattern of postcolonial museum projects. There is no institution, no collaboration, no collection to be returned or received, and yet the visual exhibit is every bit a part of the online museological landscape. Burton is not working with or from an institutional space and yet the museum space is implied within the visual landscape of his virtual exhibition. Christina Kreps argues that the "post-colonial museum is fundamentally about inverting power relations and the voice of authority" (2011, 75). With Burton's exhibit we see what happens when power is wrested from curatorial or institution control. The digital platform allowed Burton to create a visual and aural landscape outside the understood museum space and his own quasi-museological space. Digital technologies and the digital museum are not the revolution here; it is Burton's message that we should see as revolutionary. The digital museum grew out of the same narrative and temporal space as the postcolonial museum. Although museum specialists were too busy at the turn of this century debating standards and defining digital policies to recognize this critical overlap (Parry 2011, 317) it is now clear that the rise of digital technologies within collecting institutions not only coincided with the direct challenge to institutional authority by indigenous communities, but that this intersection produced *a new set of possibilities* for both the online and offline museum space. In the last five years there has been a shift by "the community of digital heritage practitioners and

researchers looking to the social, cultural and spiritual implications and accountability of their actions with digital media” (Parry 2011, 318).

Digital platforms, projects, and spaces are not just tools to reach more viewers or open more collections; they are, instead, part of the possible integration of new types of *relationships* that will redefine the very notion of the museum itself. Without relationships the digital is *merely* a tool. Paul Basu calls for scholars to see the twenty-first-century museum as “relational entities,” that is, as “institutions that have continuing relationships with, and responsibilities toward, those communities with whom their histories are intertwined and whose cultural artifacts populate their stores and displays” (2011, 28). One need not see demands for new types of relationships and obligations as a utopian dream, or dismiss calls for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems as a neocolonial ruse. Instead, by examining the diverse and expanding file of online museological spaces, one can imagine a way of looking that pulls from multiple sources without claiming completeness. No one exhibit or single policy will usher in a new museum landscape free of institutional structures and entrenched power relations. The digital space can be as divisive as it is unifying. A new visual economy built on the assumption of reciprocity and acceptance of obligations to act in accordance with diverse ethical systems can, however, redefine the very act of looking as a dialogical space that might as often result in not seeing as it does in being invited to look. We can repaint this picture, and we have begun.

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## Notes

- 1 <http://www.smithsonianconferences.org/2009/spi/> (accessed April 28, 2014).
- 2 <http://www.vectorsjournal.org/issues/3/digitaldynamics/> (accessed April 28, 2014).
- 3 <http://www.google.com/corporate/index.html> (accessed April 28, 2014).
- 4 [http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/case\\_of\\_access](http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/case_of_access) (accessed April 28, 2014).
- 5 The Virtual Museum of the Pacific, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yx6dT7G8vTM> (accessed April 28, 2014).
- 6 [http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/wiki\\_pages/Inuvialuit%20Sewing](http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/wiki_pages/Inuvialuit%20Sewing) (accessed April 28, 2014).

- 7 [http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/item\\_types](http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca/item_types) (accessed April 28, 2014).  
 8 <http://www.flickr.com/commons> (accessed April 28, 2014).  
 9 <http://godslake.nfb.ca/> (accessed April 28, 2014).

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Kimberly Christen is an associate professor in the Department of English, the Associate Director of the Digital Culture and Technology Program, and the Director of Digital Projects at the Plateau Center, Native American Programs Office at Washington State University. Her academic research focuses on the intersection of digital technologies, archival practices, cultural heritage movements, and intellectual property rights within indigenous communities and other stakeholders. She is currently directing the Plateau Peoples' Web Portal (<http://plateuportal.wsulibs.wsu.edu/>), an online collaboratively curated site for Plateau cultural materials, and Mukurtu CMS ([www.mukurtu.org](http://www.mukurtu.org)) a free, open source digital archive and content management tool specifically designed to meet the needs of indigenous communities as they manage and share their digital cultural heritage. More of her work, including publications and projects, can be found at her website at [www.kimchristen.com](http://www.kimchristen.com).