

REPRESENTING REPATRIATION: EXHIBITING THE OMAHA COLLECTION AT THE HEARST MUSEUM

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Introduction

In the midst of current debate over the politics and poetics of virtually everything, intensified by this Columbian quincentennial year, I taught a seminar in Spring 1992 on Native American arts through the University of California at Berkeley Native American Studies Department, using the collections of the Hearst (formerly Lowie) Museum of Anthropology.¹ Students were charged with curating teaching exhibits to accompany a variety of courses taught in Native American Studies; none had had prior experience in museum practices, though all had backgrounds in art, anthropology, Native American or Ethnic Studies, and/or history. The seminar was also intended to explore the problems of cultural representation inherent in museum display and invite Indian people to participate in the curatorial process as students, consultants, and commentators.²

In this essay, I explore the representation and repatriation of Native American cultural materials through the example of one student exhibit. **Repatriation** here refers to the process of returning ethnographic objects from museum collections to Native American tribal groups, a process codified in a 1990 Federal law (discussed below) though it has been informally underway for the last two decades. As a social phenomenon, repatriation reflects evidence of a North American pan-Indian revitalization movement for which control of cultural resources is a goal.³ The 1990 law alters power relationships between museums and Native American communities, possibly tipping the balance in favor of the latter (or at least less completely in favor of museums); however, conflicting concepts of ownership result in contested interpretations of the law. At the center of the issue are problems of representation: Who controls the ownership and production of cultural images?

Five exhibits were produced in the seminar, but the one discussed here dealt specifically with repatriation. Two students, Neal Hampton (a Native American Studies major and a member of the Caddo tribe) and Carmen Hernandez (an Anthropology major with a minor in Ethnic Studies), researched the Omaha collection at the Hearst Museum in order to produce the exhibit, "On Repatriation," to be used in conjunction with Professor Karen Biestman's course on **Native Americans in Contemporary Society**, taught in the Native American Studies Department at Berkeley.⁴ Dennis Hastings, an Omaha tribal historian, has initiated discussion of the return of this collection to the tribe. The artifacts were collected by Omaha

anthropologist Francis La Flesche at the behest of Phoebe Hearst in 1902-1905. The situation offered an excellent opportunity for the students and the public to explore first-hand the questions involved in repatriation. The story of the exhibit raises a number of issues critical in cultural anthropology today: the role of the native anthropologist, the control of cultural property, and the problems of ethnographic representation.

To tell the story, I will give the background of the Omaha collection at the Hearst, survey the cultural and legal aspects of repatriation, examine the Omaha tribe's negotiations for repatriation at the Hearst and other museums, and then take a look at the exhibit itself.

The Origin of the Omaha Collection at the Hearst Museum and the Not-so-Simple Notion of "Native Anthropology"

The cast of players associated with the Omaha collection reads like a Who's-Who of early American anthropology: the Omaha ethnologist Francis La Flesche; the self-taught anthropologist Alice Fletcher, who worked at the Peabody Museum at Harvard and later the Bureau of American Ethnology; the founder of the Berkeley Anthropology Department, Alfred Kroeber; and benefactor and now museum namesake, Phoebe Apperson Hearst. Alice Fletcher, a friend of Phoebe Hearst, knew of the latter's efforts to build an ethnographic collection at Berkeley and arranged for Francis La Flesche to procure artifacts for Berkeley beginning in 1902. Since 1884, both he and Fletcher had been working on building the Omaha collection at the Peabody Museum at Harvard (Mark 1988: 99-100, 282-292).

The collection at Berkeley is small compared to that held until 1990 by the Peabody (approximately 85 items in the former, over 280 in the latter), but includes a to-scale model of a ritually important sacred tent and thirteen photographs of the artifacts being worn or used, most of which also appear in *The Omaha Tribe* (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911). Many of the artifacts were commissioned by La Flesche specifically for the Berkeley collection and purchased with funds provided by Phoebe Hearst. Correspondence from La Flesche to Kroeber indicates the Omaha ethnographer's dissatisfaction with the incompleteness of the collection, and attributes the demise of Indian material culture to pressures of white domination:

I regret that the collection is not complete and cannot be made so but you, perhaps, know as well as I do that it is impossible to make a complete collection of the articles of any one tribe on account of the inroads made by the white man's civilization among all the tribes of the country. There are some few things yet to be secured and I will forward them to you as fast as I can get them. (Francis La Flesche to Alfred L. Kroeber, September 15, 1904, Hearst Museum of Anthropology)

It took almost another year for La Flesche to send a typewritten "catalogue" (in actuality a bare description) of the artifacts to Kroeber and a dozen photographs "which I hope will prove useful toward a better understanding of the collection" (La Flesche to Kroeber, June 10, 1905).

La Flesche is often pointed to as one of the first Native American anthropologists and his position in this drama complicates any repatriation request. If he, an Omaha, with Hearst funds, purchased or commissioned the artifacts, doesn't ownership clearly rest with the museum? This is essentially the Hearst Museum argument. However, La Flesche's intent also appears to have been to preserve Omaha culture for future Omaha people. For some Omahas, most notably tribal historian Dennis Hastings, a legal definition of museum "ownership" is moot and the collection should be considered Omaha collective property.

Adding to the confusion is the question of La Flesche's identity as Omaha. Francis La Flesche was born in 1857 to Joseph La Flesche, Jr. (Iron Eye), and Tainne (or Elizabeth Esau), an Omaha woman and Joseph's second wife. Joseph, the son of a French fur trader and a Ponca Indian woman, was adopted by the Omaha chief Big Elk in the 1840's to be his successor as chief (Mark 1988: 67). The Omahas, strongly patrilineal, traditionally determine identity through the father; in 1962, descendants of Joseph La Flesche were removed from the Omaha tribal rolls based on his Ponca ancestry. However, the La Flesche family was soon restored to the rolls based on the elder La Flesche's adoptive Omaha identity and the family's contributions to Omaha life (Clark and Webb 1989: 137-8).

Perhaps more significant than the contested kinship aspect of the La Flesche identity is Joseph's paradoxical legacy of assimilationist leadership. Believing survival of the Omaha people meant adapting to white ways, Joseph La Flesche in the 1850's helped establish a Presbyterian mission and school on the reservation (which Francis later attended) and a settlement of wooden frame houses, which the more traditionalist Omahas who lived in earth lodges dubbed "the village of make-believe white men" (Mark 1988: 67). Eventually converting to Christianity, Joseph La Flesche nevertheless was an activist for Omaha retention of reservation lands and against removal to Indian Territory (which was the fate of their Ponca neighbors), though to this end he ultimately supported the allotment policies which were so ruinous to so many tribes.

Alice Fletcher was a key supporter of Joseph La Flesche's efforts, and as anthropologist to the Omahas, she directly oversaw allotment on the reservation in 1883 with Francis La Flesche acting as her interpreter (Mark 1988: 88-101). Fletcher saw allotment as a means of insuring the Omaha people's future survival in the American mainstream, though at the cost of leaving behind their traditional ways; in the face of this disintegration, she set to work compiling a comprehensive salvage ethnography. In Fletcher's foreword to *The Omaha Tribe* (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911),⁵ she depicts Francis La Flesche as a conservator of Omaha culture, concerned with gathering "the rapidly vanishing lore of the tribe," and as essential in her salvaging project (30).

Yet, La Flesche ingeniously provided for a potential future revitalization of his people in the terms of the collection of Omaha artifacts made in this same late nineteenth-century period for the Peabody Museum: he specified that the materials were on loan until such time as the Omaha would like them back. In 1990, the Waxthe'xe, or sacred pole, as well as the rest of the collection, were returned from the Peabody to the Omaha tribe. The collection's journey is traced in an award-winning video, *The Return of the Sacred Pole* (1990), written, directed and produced by Michael Farrell of the Nebraska Educational Television Network, assisted by Dennis Hastings, Omaha tribal historian, and Robin Ridington, anthropologist at

the University of British Columbia (see Fletcher and La Flesche 1911, chapter 6, and Ridington 1987 for a discussion of the pole's significance to the Omaha).⁶

The Return of the Sacred Pole reveals continuing ambivalence on the part of some Omaha leaders about Francis La Flesche's role as anthropologist. Edward Cline, a former tribal chairman, remarks on La Flesche's Ponca identity and criticizes *The Omaha Tribe* for its "deficiencies". The video narrative, read by Roger Welsch (a Nebraska folklorist and author of *Omaha Tribal Myths and Trickster Tales* 1981), locates the source of current reservation poverty in allotment, and claims that Fletcher and La Flesche hurt the Omaha more than helped them. Current tribal chair Doran Morris, the great-grandson of Yellow Smoke, the Omaha elder who gave over the sacred pole to the team of anthropologists in 1888, expresses gratitude for their foresight in preserving tribal cultural heritage. Tribal historian Dennis Hastings makes the point that the Omaha tribe "grew up with anthropology," providing crucial ethnographic data to La Flesche, Fletcher, and others, thus making central contributions to the beginnings of the discipline in the United States (personal communication, 1992). From these voices, it is evident there is no uniform "Omaha" position.

Francis La Flesche blurred the margins of his overlapping cultural worlds, collecting for museums and writing ethnography in a manner which might provide for future retrieval of one version of his tribe's past, while at the same time implementing policies of assimilation which precipitated an abrupt break with that past. Nonetheless, La Flesche should certainly be considered an early native anthropologist, or what Lila Abu-Lughod would term a "halfie": "people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas [or in this case, mission] education, or parentage" who face special dilemmas, "dilemmas that reveal starkly the problems with cultural anthropology's assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other" (1991:137). These dilemmas include "travel[ing] uneasily between speaking 'for' and speaking 'from'" the native's point of view (1991:143). La Flesche's case adds the tension between collecting "for" and collecting "from" one's people. The dynamics of the not-so-simple notion of native anthropology should instruct us in the politics of repatriation.

The Background of Repatriation in the United States

The post-Wounded Knee period of the 1970's-80's saw increased emphasis upon sovereignty as the basis of Indian legal activism (Deloria and Lytle 1984, Wilkinson 1987). One vehicle of the sovereignty movement is the demand for repatriation of human remains, associated funerary objects and cultural materials held by non-tribal institutions to their tribes of origin. The control of these materials is literally and symbolically attached to an assertion of sovereign status on the part of Indian nations.

The term "repatriation" is a symbolically loaded one: generally understood in U.S. law to refer to the return of persons (or property) to an original place of citizenship (Black 1983: 675), repatriation implies interaction between sovereign nations and, particularly in the case of human remains and grave goods, carries the weight of a sacred task. The pan-tribal character of the repatriation movement and its emphasis upon the sacredness of its claims has been behind its hard-won success in Congress (see Green and Mitchell 1990, and Price 1991 for

overviews). The culmination of its efforts in legislative terms is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-601).

Somewhat different procedures obtain for human remains and associated grave goods; for the purposes of this paper, we are concerned primarily with ethnographic items. The law requires that museums summarize their collections of Native American sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony and unassociated funerary items within three years and notify the appropriate tribes. Four steps are involved in the repatriation process (adapted from Monroe and Echo-Hawk 1991):

- 1) The tribe must show that the items they request are indeed sacred, of cultural patrimony, or are funerary objects.
- 2) The native group must then establish their cultural affiliation to the object in question or show prior ownership.
- 3) The native group must then show that the federal agency or museum does not have right of possession to the items. The institution may then present its counter argument.
- 4) The institution must make a decision, based on the above steps, regarding the disposition of the items.
- 5) The native group may appeal the decision before a Federal Review Committee made up of Native Americans and museum professionals. However, this committee's findings are not legally binding; ultimately, cases may be taken to court for resolution.

The Repatriation Act of 1990 has not yet been fully tested in the courts. Museums and Indian peoples are struggling with often conflicting interpretations of such terms as "right of possession," "cultural patrimony," and "sacred". Rarely is the interpretation of ownership so clear as in the guidelines Francis La Flesche crafted for the Omaha collection at the Peabody Museum; the museum was never to "own" the artifacts, but to hold them in trust until the Omaha wanted them returned. Even so, in negotiations with the Omaha, the Peabody required assurances that the artifacts would be "appropriately" cared for before returning them (Farrell 1990).

Related legislation in 1989 (Public Law 101-185) established the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) within the Smithsonian Institution and also required the Smithsonian to repatriate certain human remains and funerary objects. Thus, ironically, repatriation is at the center of that museum's creation: NMAI officials have expanded the requirements laid out in the law to include "communally owned Native property, ceremonial and religious objects, objects acquired by illegal or unethical means, as well as objects considered to be...duplicate and abundant" (Smithsonian Institution 1991: 32).

In the legislation creating the museum, we see a blurring of the previously opposed categories of "museum" and "native" property, making it impossible to clearly separate the

two, and reminding us of the position of Francis La Flesche, who was both collector "for" and collector "from" the Omaha.

Omaha Negotiations for Return of Museum Collections

The entire La Flesche/Fletcher collection of the Peabody Museum is now held for the tribe at the Anthropology Museum of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, where Omahas are actively engaged in its study. A tribal center is planned to house the materials. In addition to ethnographic collections, the Omaha tribe also has experience in the repatriation, study and reburial of skeletal remains. Human remains from the Heye Foundation in New York were returned to the tribe and, by order of the tribal council, were reburied after analysis by physical anthropologists at the University of Nebraska (Hastings, personal communication 1992).

The negotiations regarding the Hearst Museum Omaha collection are thus far at an early stage. Some correspondence has taken place between museum officials and Dennis Hastings; at this point, no formal tribal request for return of the artifacts has been made. There are some fundamental differences between the Peabody and the Hearst cases: the loan agreement was spelled out by La Flesche in the former case, while in the latter, he appears to have seen himself as assisting Phoebe Hearst and Alfred Kroeber in building the collection at the new University of California. The Museum would appear to have the right of possession if the issue is simply "legal acquisition" of artifacts; however, the power of the Omaha claim to its cultural patrimony has yet to be fully tested. What may be most critical in the end is that the process set into motion by the repatriation law opens up the possibility of dialogue between the museum and the tribe. Individuals on both sides have expressed interest in an extended loan to the Omaha of some of the artifacts, though this has not been formally discussed. A more immediate result of this dialogue is the May-June 1992 "On Repatriation" exhibit at the Hearst, which challenged visitors to question the relationship between museums, artifacts and their Native American communities of origin.

Exhibiting Repatriation: The Challenge of Representation

How did two undergraduates deal with the Omaha case study? As a way of avoiding the contradictions involved in a museum exhibit about repatriation including objects being considered for return, the students chose to exhibit eight of the ethnographic photographs La Flesche provided with the collection rather than the actual materials themselves (see Figures 1 & 2). The student curators did make an exception by including a flute (Figure 2), a secular object used in courtship, as an example of Omaha craftsmanship. Although they developed very strong opinions supporting repatriation generally and the outcome of this case in particular, they wanted to convey differing perspectives held by various players in the drama. To this end, they conducted interviews with museum staff people, Native American Studies faculty, and tribal historian Dennis Hastings and included quotations from each in the exhibit.⁷ Facsimiles of the correspondence from La Flesche to Kroeber were placed in the exhibit to clarify the circumstances under which the objects were collected. The introductory text to the exhibit dealt with the 1990 Repatriation Act and the current situation of the collection.



Figure 1: *Sacred Tent of the White Buffalo Hide*. A model of this ceremonial tent is part of the Hearst Museum collection. Compare with Plate 27 in *The Omaha Tribe* (1911). Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.



Figure 2: *Omaha Man Playing the Flute*. A similar flute was included in the Hearst Museum exhibit "On Repatriation". Compare with Plate 49 and Figure 65 in *The Omaha Tribe* (1911). Photo courtesy of the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.

But problems of representation are not so easily closed. Once mounted in the museum frame, the late nineteenth-century photographs appeared as romanticized images, with the stiffly posed figures diluting their symbolic impact as substitute images for the artifacts in question. The students revised the exhibit text to clarify their rationale for displaying the photographs rather than the contested objects, but the paradox remained: posed stereotypes stood in the place of material culture.

Nevertheless, the impact upon viewers was significant. The exhibit challenged the very basis of museum ownership even while operating within its bounds. Ironically, the exhibit "On Repatriation," along with the exhibits of the other seminar members, was housed in the teaching exhibit area of the Hearst---in the same room as the exhibit of Ishi, the quintessential "museum Indian". A response book, a time-honored but often under-utilized fixture of museum exhibits, accompanied the student exhibits, which were collectively entitled "Challenging the Viewer's Gaze". Comments included the following:

I especially liked the "On Repatriation" exhibit, which particularly seemed to "challenge the viewer's gaze" by raising questions about different interpretations of the right of possession." (Anonymous)

An excellent exhibit showing that the students put a lot of thought, effort, and time into this preparation. Perhaps we can move from a museum of the past and move onto a museum of what is, what should be and a hope for our future. (A Navajo/Laguna Pueblo visitor)

These viewers' comments underscore the student curators' attempts to challenge traditional museum interpretations and presentations of cultural artifacts. The Omaha case raises issues beyond its particulars--which involve native anthropology and the multi-layered circumstances of the Hearst and Peabody collections--and addresses larger contemporary concerns in anthropology. The dialogue initiated in particular cases of Native American repatriation has the potential to produce a more relevant and responsible anthropology. The repatriation debate points to the heart of relations between anthropologists--including native ones--and the people we work with, not simply to study, but to learn "for" and "from".

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Notes

1 The Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, is now the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology. The name change and the accompanying debate over the political economy of naming took place in Spring 1992 and provided my students and the campus community a first-hand confrontation with the power relations between museums, funding sources, and academic scholarship.

2 Ivan Karp and Steven Levine have gathered essays which debate problems of cultural representation in museum settings; the collection was a core text in the seminar (*Exhibiting Cultures: The Politics and Poetics of Museum Display* 1991).

3 I use "revitalization" here in Wallace's sense: "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (1956: 265). Moreover, the repatriation movement is "revivalistic" in Wallace's terms; it emphasizes "the institution of customs, values, and even aspects of nature which are thought to have been in the maw of previous generations but are not now present" (1956: 267). Although Price (1991) has discussed repatriation in these terms, more work is needed to understand the challenge this movement poses to entrenched power relations between Indian nations and dominant cultural institutions such as museums. In addition, the concept of revitalization needs to be refined in light of scholarship on the invention of tradition (see Horner 1990 for a comprehensive assessment of this literature).

4 Neal Hampton and Carmen Hernandez did an extraordinary job of researching and preparing the exhibit. I am relying heavily upon their efforts in this article, which ideally would have been co-authored with them but was impossible because of time constraints. The exhibit is on permanent file at the Hearst Museum and their paper on file in the Native American Studies Department at Berkeley.

5 See Tate 1991 and Mark 1988 for the full bibliography of works by La Flesche.

6 "The Return of the Sacred Pole" won a 1991 Society for Visual Anthropology/American Anthropological Association Award for Excellence.

7 Those interviewed by Hampton and Hernandez include: Burton Benedict, director of the Hearst Museum; Karen Biestman, instructor of Native American Studies at University of California, Berkeley; Carey Caldwell, senior curator of history at the Oakland Museum; Dennis Hastings, Omaha tribal historian; Ira Jacknis, associate research anthropologist at the Hearst Museum; and Gerald Vizenor, professor of Native American Studies at University of California at Berkeley.

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