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Repatriation, Digital Cultural Heritage, and the (Re)Production of Meaning in a Canadian Aboriginal Community[i]

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Abstract:

Many Canadian First Nations and Aboriginal organizations are using digital media to revitalize their languages and assert control over the representation of their cultures. At the same time, museums and academic institutions are digitizing their ethnographic collections to make them accessible to originating communities. As the use of digital media becomes standard practice both in the production of ethnographic objects and the virtual repatriation of cultural heritage, new questions are being raised regarding copyright, intellectual property, ownership, and control of documentation in digital form. Based on four years of collaborative ethnographic multimedia production work with the Doig River First Nation (Dane-zaa) in northeastern British Columbia, I explore how new access to digitized and repatriated ethnographic documentation has shifted Dane-zaa perceptions of their intellectual property rights to cultural heritage. Using the example of the digitization of photographs of early twentieth-century Dane-zaa Dreamers' drums, and the community's subsequent decision to remove them from a virtual museum exhibit, I describe how new articulations of Dane-zaa rights to control the circulation and representation of their digital cultural heritage are guided both by traditional protocols for the handling and care of material culture, and by contemporary political concerns and subjectivities. Paradoxically, at the same time that Dane-zaa people are asserting their right to control how their cultural heritage is circulated on-line, representations of their culture and language are more prevalent on the Internet than ever before. While the ethnographic study of the use of repatriated digital cultural heritage at the local level speaks to potential of new media to disrupt established relations of power and authority, it also suggests that digitization and unrestricted circulation of indigenous cultural heritage reproduces colonial modes of representation and access to sensitive material cultural and knowledge.

Repatriation, Digital Technology, and Culture

In recent years, museums have embraced digital technologies for their ability to make collections visible on the Internet. Anthropologists are digitizing their ethnographic

archives to share them with research communities, and increasingly using digital recording technologies in their fieldwork. In what is amounting to a paradigm shift in the ways that institutions and individual anthropologists can display and create access to their collections, digital technologies—paired with innovative programming and design that is responsive to the needs of community stakeholders—are providing significant possibilities for sharing curatorial and ethnographic authority with source communities. Material culture in museum collections is being digitally photographed for online collection databases and virtual exhibits, while documentation of intangible cultural expressions is being transformed from analog photographs, film, video and tape recordings into digital files. Significantly, these technologies are allowing members of originating communities to access images of objects, audio and video recordings, and texts documenting their relatives and their material, cultural, and linguistic history. Discursively paralleling the return of tangible cultural heritage and human remains to Aboriginal communities as legislated by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) (Trope and Echo-Hawk 2000), visual access by these communities to their cultural heritage in on-line museum and ethnographic collections has become known as *virtual* or *digital repatriation* (Peers and Brown 2003).

Indigenous peoples around the world are reconnecting repatriated cultural heritage to social practices and forms of cultural production. From the printing of copies of digitized photographs and recordings for personal use, to the creation of museum exhibits, language curricula, video documentaries and websites (Bell 2003; Christen 2006b; Fienup-Riordan 2003; Moore and Hennessy 2006; Pigliasco and Colatanavanua 2005; Ridington and Hennessy 2008; Ridington and Ridington 2006), these engagements

with digital cultural heritage[1] are sites of intersecting histories of research and cultural expression, the aural and "visual legacy and historical deposits of sets of encounters and relationships" (Edwards 2003:83). While digital repatriation to indigenous communities has been described by museum scholars and ethnographers with great hope for cultural, social, and political empowerment through reconnection to tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Bell 2003; Binney and Chaplin 1993; Ridington and Ridington 2003), ethnographic work conducted at the local level to follow uses of repatriated cultural heritage has revealed tensions, contradictions, and conflicts as material and intangible cultural heritage are reconnected to dynamic social practices (Brown 2003; Ferguson, et al. 1996; Hennessy 2009; Jacknis 2000; Ridington and Hennessy 2008). Virtual repatriations and related cultural productions–equally considering ethnographic archives created by outside researchers, and indigenous media produced by originating communities– are significant "arenas in which social actors struggle over social meanings and… visible evidence of social processes and social relations" (Mahon 2000:467).

This paper explores the digital repatriation of ethnographic documentation and related processes of cultural production among members of the Doig River First Nation, an Athapaskan speaking Aboriginal community in northeastern British Columbia. In the ethnographic record they have been referred to as Beaver (Ridington 1981), and today

[1] Digital heritage is defined in the UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage as consisting of "unique resources of human knowledge and expression. It embraces cultural, educational, scientific and administrative resources, as well as technical, legal, medical and other kinds of information created digitally, or converted into digital form from exiting analogue resources. Where resources are "born digital", there is no other format but the digital object… Many of these resources have lasting value and significance, and therefore constitute a heritage that should be protected and preserved fro current and future generations. This ever-growing heritage may exist in any language, in any part of the world, and in any area of human knowledge or expression" (UNESCO 2003).

identify as Dane-zaa, meaning 'people' in Dane-zaa *Záágéʔ*. In recent years members of the Doig River First Nation have actively integrated repatriated digital photographs, video, and audio into their cultural center's exhibits. They have also used these media in locally produced audio CDs, video documentaries, and virtual exhibits.

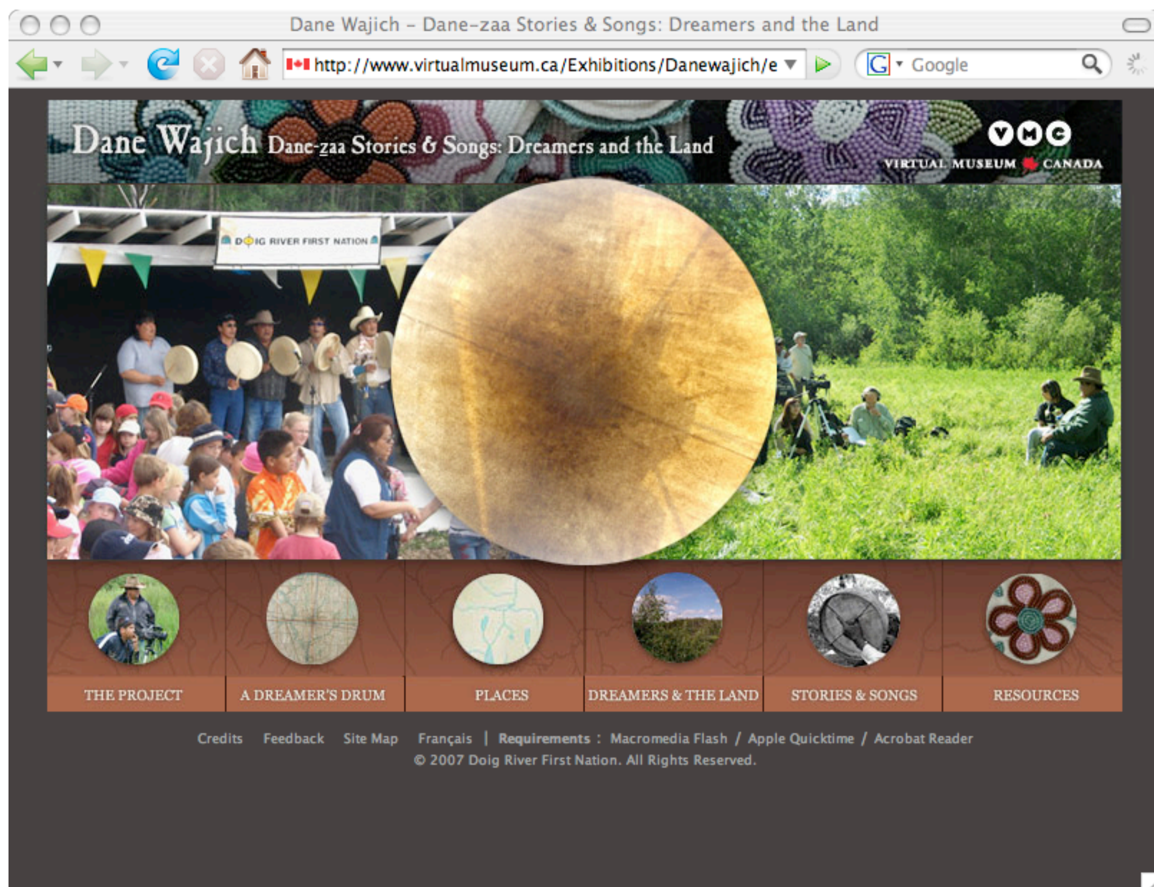

Figure 1. Dane Wajich- Dane-zaa Stories and Songs: Dreamers and the Land.
http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich

I began work at Doig River in 2004 as a web design and digital video production educator with youth. As a doctoral student conducting fieldwork between 2005 and 2008, using models of collaborative production and research most strongly associated with ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch (Feld 2003; Rouch 1974), I co-curated and produced

a virtual exhibit of Dane-z̲aa oral traditions and histories of dreamers called *Dane Wajich- Dane-z̲aa Stories and Songs: Dreamers and the Land* (2007). This participatory web-based project was in large part inspired by the 2004 virtual repatriation by anthropologists Robin and Jillian Ridington of over 40 years of their ethnographic documentation to the community in the form of a digital archive and password-protected online database (Ridington and Ridington 2003). "Dane Wajich" integrates interactive maps of traditional hunting territories with video narratives, archival and contemporary photographs and song recordings, and documentation of the project's participatory process, to teach viewers about the history of Dane-z̲aa *nááchę* (dreamers) and their significance for the present generation. *Nááchę*, who can be genealogically located in the Dane-z̲aa kinship universe, are said to travel to heaven in their dreams and bring back songs and prophesies that provide moral and spiritual guidance. Dane-z̲aa oral tradition also asserts that *nááchę* dreamed ahead to find the trails of game animals, predicted the coming of white settlers to the Peace River region of British Columbia, and the industrialization of the oil-rich landscape (Brody 1988; Ridington 1988). The last known Dane-z̲aa dreamer was Charlie Yahey, who passed away in 1976. The songs of many dreamers are remembered today by "song keepers" who have revived drumming and singing at Doig River, teach younger generations to drum and sing, and lead the group known in the Fort St. John area and beyond as the Doig River Drummers.

"Dane Wajich" is available to the world, hosted by the Virtual Museum of Canada. Between 2005 and the project's launch in 2007, co-curator and producer Amber Ridington and I worked with the community and an extensive team of linguists, ethnographers and educators to facilitate the production of the exhibit and negotiate its

representation of Dane-zaa stories and songs. The transformation of Dane-zaa cultural heritage from analog into digital form provided opportunities for participation in cultural production and creative engagement with new media. Connections between elders and youth were strengthened as they worked together to record content and evaluate the websites throughout their production. “Dane Wajich” facilitated a reconnection to cultural heritage documentation that had not always been accessible, despite the circulation of many analog copies. Community members gained a greater awareness of what had been recorded by anthropologists over the years. Further, through collaboration with a range of ethnographers, linguists, and folklorists, the mobilization of repatriated cultural heritage forged new possibilities for participatory research, elicited community research priorities, and strengthened relationships between researchers and the community. Virtual repatriation here initiated what Elizabeth Edwards (2003) has characterized as a shift from ‘public’ (determined by ‘outsider’ concerns) to ‘private’ (determined by insiders):

> The traditional reading of ‘The Archive’ has functioned as a public reading of photographs [and other media] open to many meanings about culture but at the same time operating within a disciplinary paradigm that reified and objectified the subject matter as both data and archetype. As a result it is possible for a photograph to stand for ‘The Nuer’ or ‘The Inuit’. (Edwards 2003:85)

A ‘private’ reading of ethnographic media would therefore occur in the context from which they were originally extracted; “meaning and memory stay with them, as with family photographs” (Edwards 2003:85). At Doig River, repatriated photographs, audio CDs, videos, and websites have been read, interpreted, and reproduced in this way.

At the same time, the production and review of this exhibit demonstrated that digital copies have the potential to disrupt the sense of trust and collaboration between

anthropologist and research community, and within and between communities. Although repatriated digital ethnographic materials can be used to build relationships and facilitate self-representation, they can also be uploaded to the Internet for instantaneous distribution, circulation, and unrestricted access, making otherwise privately managed tangible and intangible culture public. Once uploaded to a website, an image, video or sound recording can be downloaded, appropriated and remixed by any user with sufficient technical knowledge. Despite their promise for forms of repatriation, these digital practices also parallel histories of research, archiving, and information dissemination that have not considered local protocols for the circulation of cultural knowledge. As copyright and intellectual property regimes that have defined the ownership of collections are made visible through digital repatriation, new questions about the ethics of ownership, digitization, and circulation of cultural heritage are also being raised at individual, community, and institutional scales. Band leaders and outside researchers are forced to ask: Who has the right to determine how digital cultural heritage should be restricted or circulated? How might this change the relationship between descendant communities their digital cultural heritage, and the anthropologists and linguists with whom they work?

Digital technologies and their capacity for infinite replication and distribution complicate the shift from public to private. From this perspective, virtual repatriation has the potential to facilitate more extensive forms of public reading, re-interpretation, and remix of repatriated cultural heritage. These media are "dynamic sites of struggle over representation, and complex spaces in which subjectivities are constructed and identities are contested" (Spitulnik 1993:296). At the same time that digital technologies impede

Dane-zaa control over their own representation and articulations of identity, I suggest in this paper that ethnographic attention to media such as “Dane Wajich” reveals tensions between indigenous desire for control over representation and wider movements to make knowledge free and accessible to all (Lessig 2008). These media are significant locations “for the revisioning of social relations with the encompassing society, and exploration that more traditional indigenous forms cannot so easily accommodate” (Ginsburg 1994:372).

Negotiating Public and Private

Kim Christen (2009) has asked anthropologists to question the ‘openness’ of their visual archives and the ethical parameters used to justify ‘sharing’ materials in the digital age. Based on digital archive design work with the Warumungu community in Australia’s Northern Territory, she suggests that “Indigenous knowledge systems make clear other ways to conceptualize how information can and should be shared, how access is constructed, and how expanding our understanding of openness has been limited by our own default notions about the boundaries of information freedom” (Christen 2009:5). The “Dane Wajich” exhibit similarly provides insight into the role of virtual repatriation and participatory media production in generating indigenous articulations of intellectual property rights and knowledge systems that challenge discourse that aligns open access with a progressive notion of the ‘public good’ (Christen 2009; Kelty, et al. 2008). On the one hand, Dane-zaa elders at Doig River exercised agency in the selective interpretation and performance of traditional narratives and life histories that they recorded for inclusion in the exhibit and for communication to a world-wide audience. On the other

hand, Dane-z̲aa at Doig River and in related communities drew on their personal knowledge of protocols for handling and care of sacred material culture to make decisions about the control and restriction of their representation in digital form.

The Doig River community initially chose a painted drum made by the dreamer Gaayęą in the early twentieth century to be thematic anchor of the exhibit. Chief Garry Oker brought the drum to an initial exhibit planning meeting as a way to elicit discussion about the content of the website. The drum had been passed on by Gaayęą to Charlie Yahey, who had given it to the Chief Oker's grandfather Albert Askoty. Chief Oker inherited the drum when his grandfather passed away. Although torn and separated from its frame, the drum moved elders at the meeting to speak about Gaayęą, the map of the trail to heaven he had painted on the drum, and the ways in which Dane-z̲aa dreamers had traveled throughout Dane-z̲aa territory, bringing songs from heaven that they used to pray for the people. These were defining moments in the exhibit's participatory production process, both thematically, and aesthetically. The drum inspired elders and community members to record content for the website—oral histories, prophet narratives, and dreamers' songs— and it also lead to the use of the drum as an aesthetic grounding point, with the colors of Gaayęą's map of the trail to heaven defining the project's color palette, and its image at the center of the first draft of the exhibit home page. However, in response to concern from community members that highlighting a drum in poor condition was inappropriate, the torn drum was at one point replaced with an archival image of the dreamer Charlie Yahey holding another painted drum made by Gaayęą that was in good

condition. This image was one of thousands of photographs repatriated to the community as a part of the Ridington-Dane-z̲aa digital archive.

In the two years that followed, co-curator Amber Ridington and I conducted four official, and several unofficial reviews and with the Doig River community, at which time we worked with a rotating group of band members to select, review and revise the exhibit's information architecture, photographs, video clips, audio recordings, and exhibit text. It was not until the third official review, which we had imagined and budgeted as the final one, that concerns were raised by some members about using any of the images of the drum photographed at the initial meetings, or of Gaayęą̨'s drum in the Ridington photographs with Charlie Yahey in 1968.

First, members of the Doig River First Nation drew on cultural protocols associated with the traditional care and handling of dreamers' drums to articulate restrictions on the use of images of these drums in new media contexts. Elders in the community evoked specific ways that dreamers like Charlie Yahey had cared for their drums, or "kept them clean," to comment on the extent to which the photographs of the drum could be used in the virtual exhibit. They described how Charlie Yahey and other dreamers had kept the painted drums away from people, wrapped in flour sacks, or hung in trees on the west side of hunting camps. They would not show the painted drums to just anyone, nor would they play the drums except with a specific purpose, such as praying to end long cold spells when animals were scarce and people were hungry. Menstruating women could neither see, touch, nor walk past the drums, nor could they touch fresh moose meat or the hunters' guns. Keeping the drum "clean" was a way of maintaining its power, and respecting and maintaining dreaming traditions. The elders we

spoke to expressed how dreamers and drums had been central to a Dane-z̲aa way of life that depended on successful hunting and seasonal gathering, and keen knowledge of survival on the land, and the maintenance of spiritual life and social relations within and between Dane-z̲aa and non-Dane-z̲aa groups, which have all been impacted by colonial expansion, assimilationist government policies, and the resettlement of families onto reserves.

Second, with greater awareness of the ability of the Internet to widely distribute information, community members also began to articulate particular intellectual property rights to the material, raising important questions about control of cultural heritage in digital form. Descendants of Charlie Yahey at the Blueberry River Reserve had expressed frustration that these images were being used in the Doig River project without their consent. As symbols of Dane-z̲aa identity and cultural authority, these images seem to be increasingly valued– and contested– as they are published and re-published in books, and circulated and reproduced over the Internet.

Finally, after many discussions with the current Doig River Chief and his Band Council, we removed all of the sensitive images from the virtual exhibit. We replaced the central image of the dreamer's drum with a photograph of an un-painted drum used today by the Doig River Drummers in public performances throughout northern British Columbia. The Chief and Council also decided that when using repatriated cultural heritage, in addition to gaining copyright permissions from the copyright holder, use of the archival images would also require intellectual property rights clearance from the families of those depicted in the photographs. When stakeholder families at Blueberry River declined to give permission for Doig River to use particular images in the *Dane*

Wajich project, all images of Dreamers' drums, and repatriated archival images and recordings of Charlie Yahey were subsequently removed from the exhibit.

The articulation of these restrictions occurred only after community members were actively involved in a participatory new media production process over a period of more than two years, and as sensitive images were made public so that neighboring communities could see them. As elders' exposure to the technology increased, so did their understanding of the consequences of using it. As cultural authorities in the community, their advice to the exhibit production team about what media could be made public, and what should be kept private, was crucially important to the production of a representation of Doig River's history and culture that the community could approve for world-wide distribution. At the same time, these local cultural authorities and the anthropologists with whom they work are increasingly confronted with the fact that in practice, digital cultural heritage is virtually impossible to control.

Digital Repatriation: Give and Take

The ethical paradox made clear in this research is that while visual data used in new media contexts, like the *Dane Wajich* project, can generate articulations of rights, they simultaneously *amplify* the difficulty of enforcing those rights. Even though the Doig River Chief and Council, the Elders Council, and members of the community came to a consensus over the way that sacred material culture and its digital representations should be restricted, a quick Google search still reveals multiple manifestations of the contested images on several publicly accessible websites that breach both community intellectual property rights and the anthropologist's copyright. For example, we find the

dreamer Charlie Yahey holding Gaayęą's drum on two Royal British Columbia Museum virtual exhibits, one featuring British Columbia landscapes, and a related exhibit titled "Living Landscapes". These were used with the consent and participation of the copyright holder, Dr. Ridington, in parallel to the creation of the Ridington-Dane-z̲aa digital archive, yet prior to the emergence of community contestation of the use of the Yahey and dreamers drum images. We also find a more decontextualized Charlie Yahey as part of the British Columbia Treaty 8 Association website. He has been photo-shopped out of the background of the image to float as a part of a Flash-animation in the banner of the site. Permission was not given by the copyright holder Robin Ridington, or as far as I can determine by the descendants of Charlie Yahey at Blueberry River.

Further, in 2007 the Alaska Highway Tourism Association launched an advertising campaign that features a photograph of Charlie Dominic, a respected Doig River drumming and singing mentor, who passed away in 1994. He is shown in a collage on the cover of their tourism guide, and sold on plastic travel mugs. Like the photographs of Charlie Yahey, this photograph was taken by Robin Ridington in the 1960s, and was repatriated along with other images as a part of the Ridington-Dane-zaa Digital Archive. Dr. Ridington did not give his consent for the image to be used, nor did the descendants of Charlie Dominic. The appropriation of this image of Charlie Dominic points to some of the more subtle, yet ongoing colonizing effects of the Alaska Highway, which was fundamental to the settlement and agricultural transformation of Dane-zaa territory, and to expansion of the oil and gas industry into the region.

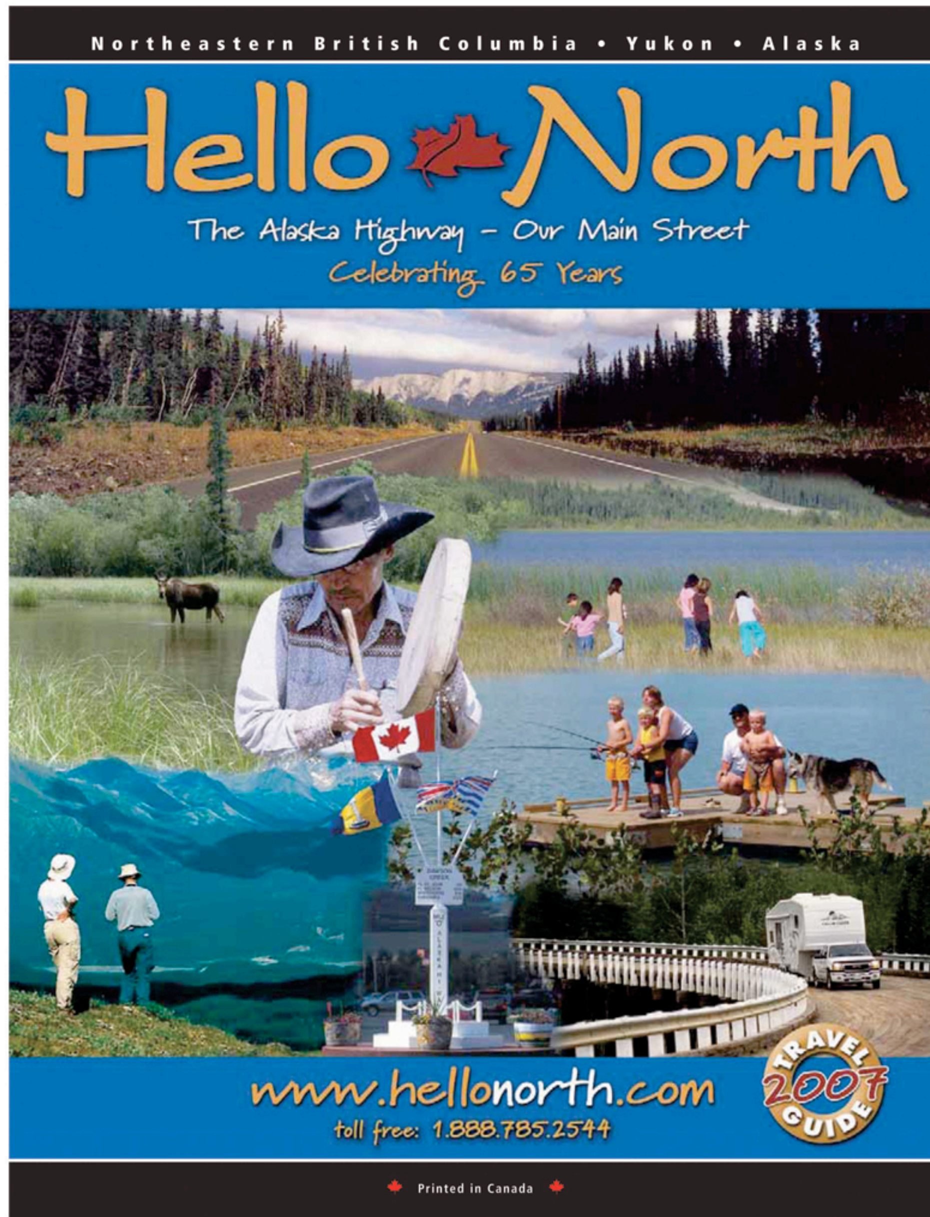

Figure 2. "Hello North" travel guide (2007) featuring the late Charlie Dominic.

The examples I have described here suggest that virtual repatriation and its essential process of digitization of cultural heritage facilitates even more extreme versions of "public" readings, contradicting the notion that repatriation facilitates "private" readings at the community and individual scales. Certainly there are precedents

for negotiating a balance between the two extremes; in the Australian context, Kim Christen has described processes of compromise and "trade-off" as Warumungu women balance the benefits of circulation of unrestricted dreamers songs on CD (i.e. approved by community authorities for public circulation) with the potential for inappropriate use of the songs by a public audience (Christen 2006b). But what if, as in the case of the photographs of Dane-zaa dreamers drums, there is a consensus in local communities that these images should not be circulated at all?

These examples also emphasize that if digitization of ethnographic documentation precedes a community's opportunity to assess the collections and possibly apply restrictions, then sensitive cultural information might be distributed without their consent. While many museum curators have taken the requests of originating communities to treat material culture with traditional modes of care and handing very seriously, even restricting visual access to sacred objects in exhibits and visible storage (Rosoff 2003), the digital medium makes it difficult to control the circulation of ethnographic representation in virtual contexts. In her ethnography of Nuxalk art production and repatriation of cultural property in Bella Coola, British Columbia, Jennifer Kramer suggests that Nuxalk desire for repatriation of cultural property is entangled with the desire for restitution for other forms of social, cultural, and political theft under colonialism. For Kramer, the desire for repatriation is "the desire for self-representation, both as an individual and as a First Nation" (Kramer 2004:163). Similarly, members of the Doig River First Nation view repatriation of cultural and linguistic documentary heritage as an important milestone in a wider struggle for self-governance, economic independence, and self-representation. Repatriated digital cultural heritage plays a

significant role in the articulation and re-mediation of Dane-zaa cultural and political identities.

Complicating attempts of Dane-zaa communities to self-represent, digital technologies are facilitating an unprecedented shift away from locally controlled and mediated forms of knowledge, to unfettered public access, remediation, and remix of documentation of intangible cultural heritage and material culture in museum collections. Digitization, and related open access discourses that position knowledge as shared view efforts to enforce copyright and restrict access as outdated corporate modes of preventing creative and academic expression. While indigenous media and archiving projects in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, and North America (Christen 2006a; Iverson, et al. 2008; Pigliasco 2007; Ridington and Ridington 2003; Tapsell 2001) provide insight into the ways that certain forms of knowledge should be kept private, open access movements contradict the efforts of members of indigenous communities to restrict access to their sensitive digital cultural heritage.

My fieldwork has demonstrated a tension between the documented benefits of virtual repatriation and the practices of digitization, digital archiving, and Internet-based distribution that parallel prior practices of archiving and storage of collections. As in the past, textual and visual representations of aboriginal people, removed in time and space from their complex web of social relations, have been used by anthropologists, museums, and the state to construct "illusions of possession" which can be systematically ordered and organized according to the criteria of the collectors and curators (Geller 2004:166).

Digital technologies are broadening inequities in power over representation, as the tools of the digital ethnographer or archivist– the computer, the camera, the audio

recorder– are simultaneously the means of production of representation and the means of distribution of representation (Cameron 2007). Access to digital technology, and knowledge of digital production and distribution of representations of culture and language are fundamental constraints on individual and group agency to self-represent. These factors both complicate efforts to repatriate control over self-representation, and enrich emerging discourse around indigenous interventions into the knowledge commons. Local-level articulations of copyright and intellectual property rights— such as the right to use and to determine community, academic, and public levels of access to digital cultural heritage– reflect the complex and dynamic values that these communities attaching to their cultural and linguistic heritage in digital form. These articulations are strongly connected to collaborative digitization projects and participatory production of ethnographic representation, which have facilitated access to documented cultural heritage, and to knowledge of the technologies used to make this access possible. It is the very articulation of these rights that might facilitate the negotiation of new relationships between originating communities and researchers, such as ethnographers and linguists. According to Kim Christen, "Part of the inclusion of new technologies in these ventures is about maintaining control, both technological and social, over how knowledge is catalogued, circulated, and cultivated" (Christen 2005:327). It is only though such re-responsible engagement with new media and management of digital cultural heritage that members of the Doig River and Blueberry River First Nations might find new ways to have control over representation of themselves as individuals, and as First Nations, repatriated.

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