

REVITALIZING A “DANGLING” ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTION: MATERIALITY, ARCTIC TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE, AND THE LIBERAL ARTS^I

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to raise awareness of small, scattered ethnographic collections and illustrate how a liberal arts model of open-ended, object-based inquiry can help breathe new life into old collections. The term “dangling collection” is introduced to specifically describe college- and university-housed orphaned collections that lack museum stewardship and curricular inclusion. My example centers on a small but important group of ethnographic objects from the North American Arctic that is now maintained at Oberlin College. Academic scholarship, university teaching practices, and Indigenous community interests are all coalescing around object-centered inquiry, and I demonstrate how the Arctic Collection’s dangling status in this era of material-focused research has helped to spur a collaborative approach to its curation. Oberlin’s Arctic Collection is now emerging as a point of meeting, dialogue, and knowledge exchange between various stakeholders, including Alaska Native culture bearers and undergraduate student researchers.

INTRODUCTION

This essay argues for the importance of small, scattered ethnographic collections and illustrates how a liberal arts model of learning that stresses open-ended, object-based inquiry can help breathe new life into such collections. My example centers on a small group of Arctic cultural materials housed at Oberlin College in Ohio, which includes objects ranging from Yup’ik fish skin bags to Cree/Métis snow goggles. The objects were originally obtained by Smithsonian Institution naturalists and provide a valuable record of nineteenth-century Indigenous lifeways as well as scientific collecting methods. In recent years the collection has spurred collaborations between college faculty, library staff, students, and source community members that are transforming once-hidden objects into meaningful opportunities to build and exchange knowledge.

The Arctic Collection came to Oberlin College 130 years ago, reasonably well documented but without any relevance to the school’s teaching mission of the time. Although it once shared space with a campus natural history collection, the Arctic material lacked formal museum stewardship for decades. In short, it had become orphaned—a term used to describe natural history and anthropology collections that are in some way imperiled due to factors ranging from lack of documentation to the closure of a stewarding institution (Adrain and Work 2017; West 1988). In a recent Society for American Archaeology webinar, Danielle Benden (2017) defined orphaned collections as “groups of objects and/or associated records with unclear ownership that have been abandoned.” Finally, Barbara Voss (2012:145) uses the term “orphaned” for

collections “that have either lost curatorial support or were never curated in the first place” and shows how community-based research activities can help address archaeology’s “curation crisis” (Marquardt et al. 1982; Sullivan and Childs 2003), wherein the buildup of collections, including those generated by cultural resource management (CRM) activities, has long outpaced archaeologists’ ability to adequately care for or study them.

For several years I have been engaging with orphaned collections of various types on Oberlin’s campus and at other academic institutions, where faculty and staff have generously opened cupboards and desk drawers to reveal the institution’s once-prized teaching collections of botanical samples, archaeological finds, and mounted bird specimens. The phenomenon of nearly forgotten institutional collections is so widespread that I have come to give them the special term “dangling collections”: natural history and cultural collections that were widely accumulated in nineteenth-century U.S. college and university museums, largely as teaching aids. Their remnants now linger in institutional shadows, uncurated and museumless, as a result of shifting ideals in science and anthropology.² Some dangling collections are poorly documented, although this is not true in the case of Oberlin’s Arctic Collection. Instead, what primarily defines dangling collections is their loss of apparent academic relevance.

The tide is now shifting, however, as a new materiality, in numerous realms of knowledge making, is gaining ground within educational institutions. Indigenous community interests, university teaching practices, and many areas of academic scholarship are all turning to object-centered inquiry to address a series of intellectual problems to which dangling collections may offer an ideal solution. A liberal arts education stresses creativity, open-minded inquiry, and communication skills, making college and university collections ideal resources around which various stakeholders can interact and learn.

I begin by discussing three distinct threads of material-focused inquiry into which dangling ethnographic collections can be productively woven, followed by an introduction to Oberlin’s Arctic Collection. The sections that follow show how Voss and colleagues’ view of “curation as research” (Voss 2012; Voss and Kane 2012; also see Benden 2017) has become a guiding premise of recent work with Oberlin’s once-dangling Arctic Collection: the perspective that “accessioning, inventory, cataloguing, rehousing and conservation are not simply precursors to the research, but rather meaningful gen-

erative encounters between scholars and objects” (Voss 2012:145). Object curation-based research helps build learning networks of students, faculty, and staff working in a Western educational setting and can extend beyond the institution to include traditional knowledge bearers. Excerpts from a collection consultation with Rosemary Ahtuanguaruk (Inupiaq) and a description of a class session led by Sven Haakanson Jr. (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq) demonstrate how the goals and methods of inquiry used by Indigenous consultants can transform a classroom status quo, engender reciprocal learning within a liberal arts learning context, and contribute to more multivocal considerations of ethnographic collections in their past and current settings.

MATERIAL TURNS

In academic research circles, “things” are back. Art history is retreating from purely visually based interpretive approaches and has experienced a “material turn” in the last 20 years (Gell 1998; German and Harris 2017; Yonan 2011), while scholars working across various disciplines, from science and technology studies (STS) to political science, draw our attention to the social and political contexts in which technologies are created and used (Gosden and Marshall 1999; Latour 1988; Lubar and Kingery 1993; Pfaffenberger 1992; Pinch and Bijker 1984). And while archaeology has long been attentive to object histories and human-object interactions (e.g., Leroi-Gourhan’s *chaîne opératoire* [1964, 1965]; Schiffer’s “life history” approach [1976, 1992]), the success of material culture studies in British anthropology has also contributed to an interdisciplinary effort to “learn from things” by tracing the web of social relations in which objects play a role (see Hicks 2010; Miller 2010). Such lines of inquiry inspire an ever-blossoming number of theoretical schemes whose employers nonetheless share the standpoint that the things we create push back at us, often in unanticipated ways.

Many scholars’ works reflect a deep concern over contemporary problems of (over)consumption (Bennett 2010; Winner 1989). Archaeologist Ian Hodder (2014) writes of humans’ increasing “entanglement with things” over an evolutionary time span. The changes brought about by humans’ earliest experiments with plant and animal domestication, he argues, launched our species’s ever-increasing dependencies on our built environment, producing an inescapable stream of pollution and waste. Hodder references the seemingly irreconcilable pull-push of the material in

daily life, a tension that's epitomized in hit reality television shows that tell us it's okay to aggressively compete to acquire a stranger's repossessed belongings (A&E's *Storage Wars*), yet we should only retain those personal possessions which "spark joy" (Netflix's *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*)! Scholars' Western-centric narratives of material treachery can feel justified in an era of climate change that is demonstrably linked to broad human consumptive patterns. We need not look far, however, to find examples of more sustainable and enriching relationships that can exist around *things*.

Academics are not just theorizing about material culture—many of us are now asking our students to engage with it directly as a valued approach to teaching. Object-based instruction is widespread among archivists and special collections managers (Tuckett and Lawes 2017). Now the trend is extending across the humanities to other disciplines (Chatterjee et al. 2015) and, with support from funds like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Arts and Cultural Heritage grants, is spurring stronger partnerships between library, museum staff, and faculty (Dimmock 2016).

Object-based learning offers a complement to traditional text-based methods of instruction, helping students develop observational skills through close study and engaging the sense of touch, sound, and even smell. Today's object-based teaching surely owes a nod to the "specimen-based" teaching in the natural sciences that first took hold in the U.S. in the post–Civil War era and led to the development of university museums in the first place (Kohlstedt 1988a, 1988b; Walsh 2002). This includes ethnographic collections, which were considered vestiges of "dying cultures" and first housed in natural history repositories. The current enthusiasm around object-based teaching differs from earlier scientific teaching, however, in "posing objects as flexible or agile in their pedagogical application" (German and Harris 2017:248).

In other words, educators are adopting a more inclusive attitude toward the types of collections with which students might engage, and in what ways. A Panamanian textile could be used to provide students a lesson in ethno-aesthetics, demonstrate a particular material production technique (Adams 2015), or illustrate how ethnic identity can influence a political movement (Marks 2014). Principles of physics can be demonstrated in a campus fine art museum using an image of a milk drop captured with high-speed photography (Milkova and Volk 2014:47–50); a Mexican tortilla accessioned as an herbarium specimen

both speaks to nineteenth-century research in economic botany and presages the influence of Mexican cuisine in the modern U.S. (Ulrich et al. 2015). Traditional collections divisions like natural history, fine art, ethnographic, or scientific instrument can be scrambled in order to prompt new questions and perspectives (Lubar 2017; Ulrich et al. 2015).

As German and Harris (2017:255) argue, "Teaching with objects, though, is not just about making the collections newly accessible to wider audiences. It is about making those audiences and all their diverse fields of expertise accessible to the objects, in order that they might be better and more fully understood." There is a particular weightiness to engaging ethnographic objects in our teaching practices because ancestral objects encourage us to consider the expertise that may lie outside of academic settings.

This brings us to a final material turn, which draws from widespread Indigenous cultural revitalization efforts and critical museology. In North America, Oceania, and elsewhere, Indigenous community representatives and museum professionals are increasingly seeking opportunities to exchange knowledge around museum-curated objects (e.g., Adams et al. 2018; Fienup-Riordan 2005; Haakanson and Steffian 2009). For museum professionals, the stories and information Indigenous consultants provide help collecting institutions store, handle, conserve, interpret, and display collections in ways that are better attuned to the values and traditions of their source communities (Ogden 2004). And for Indigenous community members, museum consulting visits provide opportunities to study the types of garments, tools, and ceremonial objects they may not have seen since their youth or have only heard about from Elders.

Wassilie Berlin, a member of a group of Yup'ik Elders viewing ancestral collections at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin in 1996, put it this way: "I'm thankful for the objects we have looked at which we don't see at home anymore. . . . While the white people push for assimilation, they apparently would also make it possible for us to see cultural objects in gatherings like these" (Fienup-Riordan 2005:403, 405). For many Indigenous communities, historic ethnographic collections can be important reservoirs of cultural knowledge, traditions, and beliefs in the present day.

The chance to study, discuss, and reconnect with material culture from an earlier time can also lead to knowledge repatriation, when the information and excitement is brought back and shared with the wider community (e.g.,

Haakanson 2016; Parks and Surowidjojo 2019; Steffian 2015). Often the main goal of delegations like the Yup'ik Elders in Berlin is not "to reclaim museum objects but to re-own the knowledge and experiences that the objects embodied" (Fienup-Riordan 2005:xxii).

Thus, academic scholarship, pedagogy in higher education, and Indigenous cultural revitalization efforts converge in the material realm. The specific meanings imparted to the objects themselves vary with their interaction, each of whom may approach their work with different goals, values, and methods of interaction. Many colleges and universities that house ethnographic collections today, including Oberlin College, encourage just this type of epistemological flexibility, making them ideal settings for collaborative learning around objects.

OBERLIN'S ARCTIC ETHNOGRAPHY COLLECTION

The Oberlin Arctic Collection comprises 35 cultural objects (Table 1) that were originally obtained from nineteenth-century Native villages and trading centers throughout Arctic and Subarctic North America by such renowned Smithsonian naturalists as Edward Nelson, William Healey Dall, and Lucien Turner. The objects are wide ranging in terms of provenance and function. We believe most were designed for utilitarian purposes, although many are very finely crafted. As detailed previously (Margaris and Grimm 2011), Oberlin received the collection from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in 1889 in exchange for ethnographic materials obtained in southern Africa by the Oberlin-affiliated missionary Erwin Hart Richards. Oberlin's long history of producing graduates, both women and men, who pursued teaching and missionary work around the world resulted in substantive ethnographic holdings at the college. Yet the Arctic material did not fit this pattern. It had no direct connection to Oberlin's mission and was sent by the National Museum simply, we believe, as compensation for the African objects.

Oberlin's ethnographic materials shared space with a growing natural history cabinet, which its curator, Professor A.A. Wright, carefully developed to aid in classroom science instruction (Margaris and Grimm 2011). By 1903 the cabinet, which by this time Wright had christened the Oberlin College Museum, included an impressive array of natural history specimens with 35,000 botanical specimens and 5700 fossil trays, "each

containing from 1 to 50 individual specimens" (Merrill 1903:144–145). As with so many museums of its era, however, changing times and loss of its primary, charismatic champion (A.A. Wright, in this case) led to the museum's slow demise. Eventually its components were distributed to various campus departments: the mounted bird collection to biology, fossil collections to geology, and so forth. A few items perceived to be of special artistic merit (e.g., Plains Indian beaded moccasins) made their way to the campus fine arts museum, while the remaining 2000 or so other ethnographic materials, including those from the Arctic, were eventually deposited haphazardly in a pair of campus custodial closets until a fire marshal threatened to intervene (Linda Grimm, pers. comm. 21 October 2018).

In the early 2000s, Anthropology Department faculty member Linda Grimm successfully undertook a major project with undergraduate students to research, catalog, digitize, and carefully store the ethnographic materials, which are now the Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection.³ When I joined the Oberlin faculty in 2006, my background as an Arctic archaeologist drew me into Grimm's project and to an exploration of Oberlin's Arctic objects in particular.

Since that time, Grimm, student researchers, and I have worked to piece together the Arctic Collection's life history and subsequent implications for how the collection might be used and understood in the present day. Our initial investigations focused on the Arctic Collection as a whole (see Margaris and Grimm 2011; Margaris 2017), while our recent focus has moved to the scale of individual objects. Given that the items come from across Alaska and even eastern Canada, one important goal is simply to determine each object's cultural affiliation. This is the first step toward consulting with appropriate tribal councils regarding their wishes for the affiliated objects, whether it be physical or digital repatriation, creating a traveling exhibit, facilitating in-person study by Native Elders or artisans, or other paths the collection might take.

Both published and oral information are key to connecting past and present. Unlike many orphaned objects, most of the Arctic materials at Oberlin retain relatively good provenance information included on their original National Museum of Natural History tags, which list collector and location of acquisition. Several of the collectors acquired objects from multiple areas within the Arctic; Lucien Turner, for example, collected in three distinct areas (Labrador's Ungava Bay, Unalaska, and Norton Sound [see Heyes and Helgen 2014]), and Oberlin has objects

Table 1. The Oberlin College Arctic Collection

Object Name	OCEC Catalogue No.	Collection Location	Yr. Collected	Collector
skin preparing knife	APP.C1.ab.0474	Togiak River, AK	1887	Applegate
doll	APP.C5.clah.4605	"Kassianamute"/Qissayaarmiut, Togiak River, AK	1886	Applegate
wooden bowl/dish/tray	DAL.C1.a.0091	Lower Yukon, AK	1869	Dall
wooden ladle	DAL.C1.a.0768	Yukon River, AK	1869?	Dall
wooden lance/dart w/metal tip	DAL.C1.abf.1130	Port Clarence, AK	1881	Dall
wooden ladle	DAL.C1.aq.0090	Yukon River, AK	1869	Dall
bent wood container	MCK.C1.ad.0098	Bristol Bay, AK	1882	McKay
wooden tobacco box w/lid	NEL.C1.ad.0132	"Kushunuk"/Qissunaq, AK	1879	Nelson
throwing board	NEL.C1.ar.0481	AK, location unknown	unknown	Nelson
fisherman's tool bag	NEL.C1.df.0099	"Newlukhtulgumut" (Newlukthulugumut/ Nevertuliq), AK	1879	Nelson
fishskin bag	NEL.C1.dfqx.0177	Lower Yukon, AK	1879	Nelson
walrus hide snare	NEL.C1.dq.0138	St. Michaels, AK	1879	Nelson
ivory and cord seal drag	NEL.C1.draf.0130	Cape Nome, AK	1889	Nelson
stone sinker for sculpin fishing	NEL.C1.k.0077	Cape Nome, AK	1880	Nelson
ivory story knife	NEL.C1.r.0133	"Chalitmut"/Calitmiut, AK	unknown	Nelson
ivory netting needle	NEL.C1.r.0134	Sledge Island/Ayaak, AK	1880	Nelson
seal tooth charm/ belt fastener	NEL.C1.r.0140	Sledge Island/Ayaak, AK	1880	Nelson
ivory charm/ belt fastener	NEL.C1.r.4601	Sledge Island/Ayaak, AK	1880	Nelson
ivory and metal sculpin hook	NEL.C1.rbx.0078	Norton Sound, AK	1880?	Nelson
ivory and cord seal drag	NEL.C1.rf.0137	"Kushunuk"/Qissunaq, AK	1879	Nelson
carved bone spoon	NEL.C1.r.0054	Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, "Chalitmut"/ Calitmiut, AK	1874	Nelson
carved ivory bird ornaments/ charms (set of 10)	NEL.C5.r.4606	St Lawrence Island, AK	1882	Nelson
fishskin pouch	XXX.C1.df.0135	Cape Darby, AK	1880	Nelson
wooden dart w/slate tip	NEL.C2.ak.xxxx	Norton Sound, AK	1878	Nelson
ivory ornament/buckle	XXX.C1.r.4603	Norton Sound, AK	1879?	Nelson
bone and bead wolf scarer	XXX.C7.abdefmq.4596	Sledge Island/Ayaak, AK	1880?	Nelson
ivory knife w/iron blade	RAY.C1.ebf.0136	Port Barrow, AK	1884	Ray
glass bottle w/woven spruce root cover	SHE.C5.cpq.4607	Fort Wrangell, AK	unknown	Sherry
sinew before shredding	STN.N6.f.0131	Kotzebue Sound, AK	1886	Stoney
wooden snow goggles	TUR.C1.af.0178	Ungava, Labrador, Quebec	1884	Turner
bone scraper/skin dresser	TUR.C1.e.0072	Ungava, Labrador, Quebec	1884	Turner
gut bag	TUR.C1.fhiq.0139	Unalashka, AK	unknown	Turner
ivory bead or toggle	TUR.C1.r.4600	Norton Sound, AK	1876	Turner
carved ivory doll	TUR.C5.r.4604	Norton Sound, AK	1876	Turner
children's game?	XXX.C1.aebdqx.1417	Ungava, Labrador, Quebec	1884	Turner

from each. Some items collected by Edward Nelson are documented to a general region (e.g., “Lower Yukon,” “Norton Sound”) but others are to a specific village (e.g., “Kushunuk”/Qissunag; “Newlukhtulgumut”/“Newlukth ulugumut”/Nevertuliq, a former winter village on Nelson Island, Alaska [O’Leary 2009:210–213]), and we are working to match the (anglicized) ancestral village names to contemporary related settlements. Nelson’s and Turner’s written texts, along with more contemporary sources (e.g., Crowell et al. 2010; Smithsonian Institution n.d.) have provided important contextual information on the objects’ materials and manufacturing techniques, traditional uses, and Native language names. Undergraduate students research and maintain this information in each object’s condition report and have also generated high-resolution scans of the 130-year-old National Museum tags—now artifacts themselves (Fig. 1).

On-site visits from two Alaska Native knowledge bearers, Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak (Iñupiaq) and Sven Haakanson Jr. (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq), provided a turning point in our research by providing fortuitous opportunities to expand knowledge around the collection through direct, meaningful dialogue with individuals who are culturally

connected to the Arctic Collection. Most material culture theorists today would argue—and indeed our experience illustrates—that diverse stakeholders impart different meanings to the objects. These meanings need not align. Instead, Ahtuanguaruak’s and Haakanson’s visits provided sources of mutual engagement in a learning environment that fosters dialogue, collaboration, and reciprocal knowledge building.

INDIGENOUS OBJECT LESSONS

In May 2017, Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak received an honorary doctorate of humanities from Oberlin College for her extraordinary work as an Iñupiaq environmental, cultural, and political leader and human rights activist. Ahtuanguaruak is from the northern Alaska village of Nuiqsut, where she has served as mayor, and she has spent her life advocating for the health of Arctic peoples and their lands. Ahtuanguaruak’s congressional testimony to oppose oil and gas development in culturally and biologically significant places in Arctic Alaska contributed to President Obama’s decision to ban oil drilling in large areas of the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans.

After the graduation ceremony, Ahtuanguaruak and two accompanying family members, Lucy Brown and Mae Masuleak, visited the Anthropology Department to view the Arctic Collection. We were joined by one of our newly graduated students, still in her graduation gown, who had spent the year conducting research on the collection’s history. The student’s (astonished) parents were also present, along with my colleague Chie Sakakibara, a fellow Arctic researcher, who was instrumental in bringing Ahtuanguaruak to campus.

What we planned as a brief excursion emerged, over the course of several hours, as a richly informed consultation (Fig. 2). Ahtuanguaruak, with input from her Iñupiaq companions, sat with the collection and shared detailed knowledge of traditional materials, techniques, uses, and meanings of nearly two dozen ancestral objects from Native communities across Alaska. At Ahtuanguaruak’s suggestion, we quickly launched into documentary mode, taking a series of notes, photos, and voice recordings as the consultation was under way.

The objects Ahtuanguaruak studied include several bags constructed of fish skin and other animal tissues, a skin-preparing knife, and a wooden berry basket. Two student researchers fully transcribed the recorded consultation (Ahtuanguaruak 2017), which now provides a per-

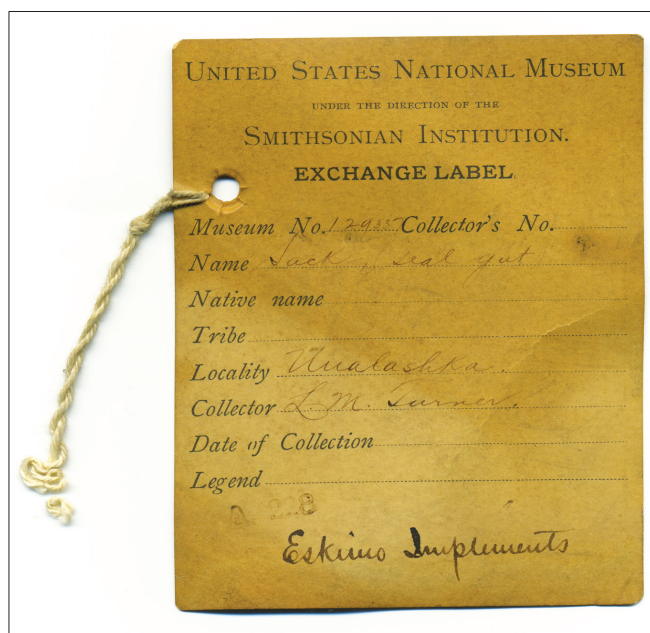


Figure 1. Oberlin student researchers Alice Blakely and Cori Mazer created high-resolution scans of the collection’s original Smithsonian Institution tags. Faint writing indicates the bag associated with this tag was recorded as a “Sack, seal gut” from “Unalashka,” obtained by L. M. Turner, NMNH 129337 (see Fig. 3). Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection TUR.C1.fbiq.0139.



Figure 2. (L to R): Rosemary Ahtuanguaruak, Mae Masuleak, and Lucy Brown examining a wooden throwing board (NEL.C1.ar.0481) collected by Edward Nelson. Photo credit: Amy Margaris.

manent record of Ahtuanguaruak's observations. Below are excerpts from the account as they relate to objects in the collection (Figs. 3–4).

When you go out hunting you don't go out thinking about how to kill the animal, it's against tradition to be bold or braggart, taboo to name the kind of animal you want to hunt in advance, it can produce badness around the hunt. You must keep good thoughts, be responsible, not argumentative, take care of your equipment, be respectful of your community—all these were expected of the hunter.

This skin preparing knife was made by a very gifted flintknapper. You can tell because the blade is very thin, and the edge was sharpened with one, expertly-placed blow. The knife was made for a skilled skin sewer who clearly cared about taking good care of her skins.

A small container probably used for collecting berries has a sinew handle, a sturdy cedar body that has been steamed and bent into shape, and a bit of red staining in its bottom creases, perhaps from escaped berry juices (Fig. 5). Both Ahtuanguaruak and our second consultant, Sven Haakanson Jr., remarked that steaming the wood properly was a repetitive and time-consuming task: the techniques were difficult to teach and learn, and many uncertainties in the process meant things could still go wrong. So, as with pottery making and metalworking in many non-industrial societies, steaming cedar effectively called for prayer and song—in addition to technical knowledge and hand skills.

Our session was educational, humbling, and sometimes emotional, such as when we encountered a shaman's rattle whose residual power warranted a moment of prayer to clear the air. It offered a marked contrast with



Figure 3. Iduġilgix (bag, sack), Unangāx̂, Aleutian Islands, Alaska. Collected by L. M. Turner between 1878 and 1881, NMNH 129337. Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection TUR.C1.fbiq.0139, 27 cm long x 23 cm wide. Photo credit: Heath Patten.



Figure 4. Ikkun (skin-preparing knife), Yup'ik, Alaska. Collected by J. Applegate in 1887, NMNH 127381. Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection APP.C1.ab.0474, 9.2 cm long x 6.85 cm wide. Photo credit: Heath Patten.



Figure 5. Berry basket, Yup'ik or Sugpiaq/Alutiiq, Bristol Bay, Alaska. Collected by C. L. McKay in 1882, NMNH 5600. Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection MCK.C1.ad.0098, 11 cm long x 11 cm wide x 9 cm tall. Photo credit: Heath Patten.

the ways student researchers and I had interacted with the objects previously, such as to produce a standardized set of condition reports. The picture that emerged that afternoon was of a series of cultural treasures. We marveled at the thinness of a carved bone spoon and the perfect stitches a Yup'ik seamstress used to craft a durable storage bag. Ahtuanguaruak's insights complicate our understanding of the "everyday" because even common items like a berry container or skin-preparing knife embody both utilitarian and spiritual notions of usefulness that are impossible to disassociate from their Indigenous context. Ahtuanguaruak's detailed observations also draw out a range of northern subsistence activities for which the objects were created, including hunting, hide preparation, and fish processing.

The next year brought a second inspirational encounter when Dr. Sven Haakanson Jr. (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq) visited Oberlin to present a lecture on his work examining museum specimens to help recover knowledge of traditional Alutiiq seafaring technology. Haakanson is the former executive director of Kodiak's Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository and the current curator of North American anthropology at the Burke Museum in Seattle. I invited Haakanson to speak with students in my upper-level archaeology seminar, and as the class gathered around we were able to pull out several of the objects for him to inspect in person. To our delight, Haakanson demonstrated use of a Yup'ik throwing board (Fig. 6) and shared insights on bentwood steaming technology. His views are based on his own experiments as a carver and woodworker, and they align closely with Ahtuanguaruak's observations. He also examined an animal tissue bag from the Aleutian Islands and bravely lifted up its stiff and crinkled opening to investigate its interior construction. The bag had been carefully stitched together from a number of different pieces, but it had been difficult to identify the materials without physically manipulating the delicate artifact. Haakanson's deftness reflects his expertise both as a museum curator and a skin sewer who instructs his own university students in the craft. Haakanson pointed out a light-colored band running up the center of the bag that identifies it as gut—an ideal medium for bags and outer garments based on its waterproof qualities.

I expected the hands-on work to segue to the typical lecture or discussion class format. Instead, Haakanson pulled out sewing kits that he had assembled in advance for each student: envelopes containing precut squares of animal gut (everyday sausage casing), artificial sinew, and



Figure 6. Sven Haakanson Jr. demonstrating how to hold a throwing board (NEL.C1.ar.0481). Photo credit: Amy Margaris.

a needle, and then proceeded to give the class an Alutiiq-style lesson in skin sewing. For the rest of the class period we observed, questioned, laughed, and struggled greatly to reproduce the special double-threaded waterproof stitch that Alutiiq sewers used to ensure that *kanaglluk* (gut parkas) kept their wearer dry in inclement weather. A number of students were inspired by Haakanson's lesson to continue stitching on their own time, and one student eventually crafted a variety of small bags like the one shown in Fig. 7.

We are extremely fortunate that Oberlin College was able to provide financial support to bring Ahtuanguaruak



Figure 7. Gut bag prepared by archaeology student Val Masters using an Alutiiq waterproof stitch learned from Sven Haakanson Jr., approx. 10x10 cm. Photo credit: Amy Margaritis.

and Haakanson to our campus. It is important to note, however, that both visitors were willing to travel the long distance to Ohio and went far beyond what was expected of or planned for them (receipt of an honorary degree; presenting an invited lecture) in their engagements with ethnographic material and students. Both are passionate community advocates who are interested in learning where scattered ancestral objects are located today, and they viewed their visits as opportunities to raise awareness of their respective cultures. Haakanson generously shared his knowledge first by examining extant objects, then bringing them to life by directing students' own craftwork as a form of embodied learning. Ahtuanguaruak and Haakanson offered complementary lessons on the Unangan gut pouch collected by Lucien Turner: one from a hunter's perspective and the other from a sewer's. Ahtuanguaruak, whose in-depth observations and encouragement were profoundly influencing, feels that "much good" can come of bringing collections like Oberlin's into the light of day. Ahtuanguaruak's work with undergraduates continued when she returned to our campus in fall 2019 for a weeklong consultation residency, the centerpiece of a new undergraduate course called "Learning with Indigenous Material Culture." Our collaborative,

multivocal approach to contextualizing ancestral collections aligns well with the new museology's decolonizing aims but also expands its reaches to include a different sort of institutional collection: one which is museumless and, hence, more easily overlooked.

THE ROLE OF CAMPUS LIBRARIES

Some of the curatorial activities undergraduate researchers have pursued with the Arctic Collection are conservation, documentation, database creation, photography, transcription, and digital scholarship. We have found that in this current era of material-focused teaching and learning, undertaking these fundamental curatorial activities has had a compounding effect, drawing attention to the collection in a way that has garnered institutional buy-in and promises to increase the accessibility of the Arctic Collection and the college's wider Ethnographic Collection over time.

To illustrate, in the early 2000s when Oberlin museum anthropology students conducted the vital work of cataloging and describing the entire Ethnographic Collection of roughly 2000 objects (of which the Arctic materials represent only a small percentage), no space could be found to adequately house the collection for active study. A custom database was designed as a salvage project, meant to record detailed information about each object's physical attributes before submitting the entire Ethnographic Collection to deep storage in a set of closets. Twenty years later, the higher education landscape has greatly shifted as university libraries simultaneously embrace new digital resources and champion object-based teaching (Barlow 2017; Chatterjee and Hannan 2015; Dimmock 2016). Staff of Oberlin's Terrell Library, recognizing the ongoing importance of various physical collections for interdisciplinary student engagement, recently provided a new safe and secure storage area for the entire Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection (including the Arctic materials) that is close to the College Archives and other associated resources. Library directors, reference librarians, heads of archives and special collections, and more have all been critical in bringing this major transition to fruition.

The college library now also stewards the digital collection by hosting the catalog on its large server. Maintaining digital collections requires specialized knowledge and skills with which library staff are most expert, including database management, metadata practices, and intellectual property concerns. Finally, library staff are central in facilitating students' use of online platforms for knowledge

sharing around the Arctic Collection. Software packages like Omeka and Esri Story Maps include mapping and timeline features whose use can complement the information relayed in online collection catalogs. In the classroom, students are encouraged to employ these platforms, which provide an outlet for rigorous scholarship coupled with greater public impact than is possible with traditional term papers (e.g., Blakely and Mazer 2017; Culture Contact and Colonialism n.d.). Digital scholarship benefits the students because the skills they develop are in high demand in museum fields, library and information sciences, and other cultural heritage disciplines, which are popular career destinations. In turn, digital projects can serve as valuable community resources, especially when projects are built collaboratively.

CONCLUSION

We use the case of Oberlin's Arctic Collection to help draw attention to the often little-known ethnographic collections that are housed in colleges and universities across North America. Many such teaching collections were left "dangling" as nineteenth-century collecting gave way to new trends in anthropology and natural science. Today, dangling cultural collections lack formal stewardship and a place in teaching curricula. Rather than view these collections as a nuisance, we can act on their incredible potential at this ideal moment when scholarly, educational, and heritage revitalization efforts are converging on the importance of material-focused inquiry.

A liberal arts education is one that stresses openness to multiple viewpoints, interpretations, and ontologies (Henseler 2017), a philosophy that makes university collections the perfect setting for knowledge exchange across the institution and beyond. All of us who live or conduct research in Alaska, for example, are acutely aware of the effects of climate change on the cultural and ecological landscape of the region. What better way for young people to realize the significance of warming waters and lands than to observe and study a fish skin bag or the caribou fur used to craft the feet of a Yup'ik doll (Fig. 8) while hearing Rosemary Ahtuanguak's own words about them?

Human-crafted objects hold the potential to speak to us in many ways. Given the right opportunity, they can reflect and nurture relationships between people and things which are multivalent, dynamic, and sometimes unanticipated. As Rosemary Ahtuanguak's sister, Lucy Brown, expressed to the newly minted Oberlin

student graduate at our recent collection consultation (Ahtuanguak 2017): "Come on over and listen to the story too! You keep writing stories as you go."

ENDNOTES

1. This essay is written from the first-person perspective of Amy Margaris and features quotations from Rosemary Ahtuanguak's 2017 consultation. Ahtuanguak's ongoing commitment to "growing goodness" through Oberlin students' engagement with the Arctic Collection has profoundly influenced our research approach.
2. Portions of this article, including a similar definition of "dangling collections," were first published on the Dangling Collections blog (Margaris n.d.).
3. For the complete online catalog, see <http://www2.oberlin.edu/library/digital/ocec/>.

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Figure 8. Nuguaq (small wooden doll) or irniaruaq (pretend person, doll), Yup'ik, Kassianamute (Togiak River), Alaska. Collected by J. Applegate in 1886, NMNH 127294. Oberlin College Ethnographic Collection APP.C5.clah.4605, 13 cm long x 8 cm wide. Photo credit: Heath Patten.

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