

Digital Sq'ewlets

A story of belongings, worldview and teachings

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Introduction: people and place

Kwéleches, hello and welcome! This article addresses a question that is central to the symposium *The Future of the Object* and the festival theme *Cultural Collisions*.

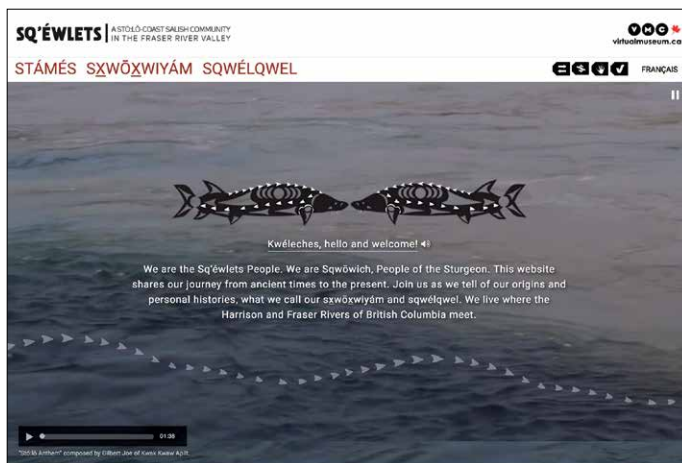
To begin with, it's necessary to explain the word *Stó:lō*. This is a Halq'eméylem word that means 'river', as well as 'People of the River'. It refers specifically to the Fraser River, and to the Indigenous people of the lower Fraser River watershed in south-western British Columbia, Canada. This article deals with Sq'ewlets, a tribe of Stó:lō people living in the central Fraser Valley, at the confluence of the Harrison and Fraser Rivers, in the up-river portion of S'ólh Téméxw—the Halq'eméylem word for 'our land' or 'our world'. Sq'ewlets, as a tribe, have historically inhabited this portion of S'ólh Téméxw for thousands of years. Throughout this broad timespan, and continuing today, the community maintains a wide range of relations throughout S'ólh Téméxw, the Coast Salish world, and beyond. As a tribe, Sq'ewlets forms part of the collective People of the River, who are connected by family, history, culture, practices, beliefs and traditions. This article focuses on the treatment of relations between Sq'ewlets and their ancestral

material culture—'artefacts' or 'objects' collected during archaeological research in the 1990s—in developing a virtual museum project and website called *Sq'ewlets: A Stó:lō–Coast Salish community in the Fraser River Valley* (www.digitalsqewlets.ca), launched in January 2017 (see homepage, opposite).

This project resulted from a collaboration involving the Sq'ewlets community, and originating with input from previous Sq'ewlets First Nation Chief Andy Phillips, Grand Chief Clarence Pennier and his son Colin Pennier (the current Chief), as well as many of the Elders in the community. A basis for creating this virtual museum website was the community's desire to facilitate an understanding and framework for bringing history to the community, and particularly to the youth—initially in a digital or intangible manner, but with an outlook to building a material, tangible installation or cultural centre. We produced this digital version, enabled through federal funding from the Virtual Museum of Canada. Our project was led by Stó:lō Nation/Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre, guided by the Sq'ewlets First Nation, and facilitated by many partner institutions, including the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University,

University of Saskatchewan, University of Victoria, Ursus Heritage Consulting, and Poptgun Media. Our project team is composed of members of all these organisations, and when we use the term 'we' in this article, we are speaking on behalf of us all but, most importantly, on behalf of our Sq'ewlets partners, who are our primary guides in this process.

Relevant to *The Future of the Object* theme, we discuss how our project team treated objects in a virtual context, and applied a process of connecting tangible culture to intangible cultural knowledge as a means of transforming 'artefacts' into 'belongings'. We provide cultural contexts and attachments for understanding artefacts as belongings, by situating material culture in a framework of Stó:lō worldview and oral history. As a result, we establish belongings as points of cultural connection and continuity between the past and the present, through which knowledge and teaching can be shared. This digital transfer of knowledge helps perpetuate, but not replace, Stó:lō and Sq'ewlets cultural heritage and identity. The purpose of our presentation at *The Future of the Object* symposium in Melbourne, on which this article is based, was to explain how we did this and what protocols were involved.



Homepage of the virtual museum website *Sq'ewlets: A Stó:lō-Coast Salish community in the Fraser River Valley* (www.digitalsqewlets.ca).

The back story

The back story to this project starts in 2011 within a broader framework and objective of achieving 'holism in heritage', through work undertaken by John Welch (Simon Fraser University), David Schaepe (Stó:lō Nation) and Andy Phillips (Sq'ewlets). Re-connecting the Sq'ewlets community to the results of archaeological work from the 1990s emerged as a core interest. Archaeology field schools were conducted in collaboration between Sq'ewlets First Nation, the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and Stó:lō Nation from 1992 to 1999. These were some of the earliest community-based archaeology programs in British Columbia. This work originated in the community's interest in exploring, understanding and ultimately protecting its ancestral lifestyles, settlements and landscape features—including 'burials'. The work resulted in extensive (but not fully catalogued) artefact collections, housed in different repositories. In 2011, our interest in revisiting these collections and outcomes was to complete the description and cataloguing of the artefacts, re-establish community connections, and strengthen the relationships to the Sq'ewlets people, their heritage and history. Sq'ewlets

Chief Andy Phillips and Grand Chief Clarence Pennier supported this effort, seeking to strengthen that foundation and understanding of who they are and where they come from, and to share this knowledge with youth of this generation and the next. Our core team, connected to Sq'ewlets, developed to include Natasha Lyons, Kate Hennessy, Colin Pennier and Michael Blake, with input from Dana Lepofsky and others, a number of whom had played important roles in the original archaeological work.

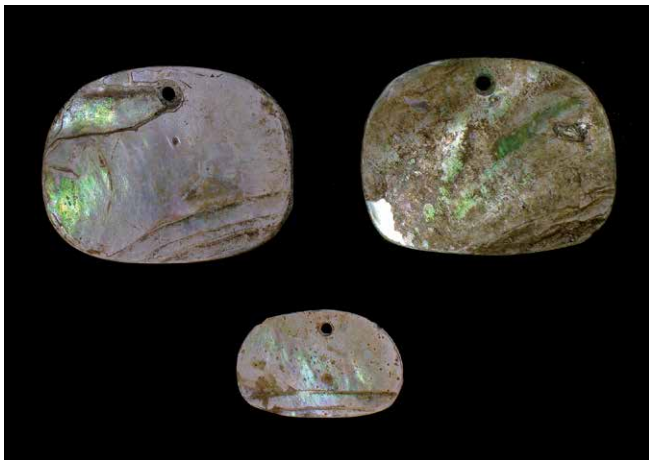
An initial effort was to consolidate the collections at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology/Lab of Archaeology, and to digitise and make accessible the Sq'ewlets' artefact collections using the Reciprocal Research Network, an existing online collections warehouse and research platform that could be accessed by all project partners, including community members.¹ We also built a larger project team of interested Sq'ewlets members, including those who had been involved in the earlier archaeological work, and others who had experience in virtual museum-type projects and digitisation. In 2013, our core team identified and successfully pursued a Virtual Museum of Canada project proposal,

securing funding to develop the *Digital Sq'ewlets* virtual museum site. This project dramatically expanded our scope of work, objectives and process.

Process, purpose and protocol

A first step in launching the digital project was to seek community vision and direction through a concept workshop held in February 2014. As a result of that meeting, Sq'ewlets members gave clear input as to how they wanted to tell their stories. Sq'ewlets Elders and members specified the following needs: to set the stage to tell our story; to focus on our youth; to have a form of living library of Elders' stories to connect Elders and youth; to have a timeline that includes our *sxwŏxwiyám* (narratives of the distant past; origin stories) from a Stó:lō perspective, our distant past, our history of the distant past, and transformations of *Xexá:ls* (the Transformer); and to specifically highlight the Halq'eméylem language. It was clearly stated that this digital platform should both promote self-sufficiency and serve to facilitate and support Halq'eméylem language learning.

There were some key principles that needed to be instilled in the youth for their transition into adulthood: to not rely on handouts,



to have pride in yourself, to stand on your own two feet, to have self-respect and honour, to be responsible and respectful of yourself and others, and to always remember who you are and where you come from. Community members openly shared personal stories about knowing who they are as an Indigenous person, and sharing that knowledge with our own community and with the outside world. Halq'eméylem places embed our history in the landscape and surround us across S'ólh Téméxw. It is critical to bring back what has been lost to colonial history and relations, and to bring our *sqwélqwel* (true and personal histories) into broader recognition. Sqwélqwel sites are a central link to the land and place names, family histories, and family names. Sq'éwlets members explained that it was important to undermine common stereotypes about Indigenous people by telling stories. This process helps to promote community health and wellbeing. A Stó:lō worldview, including spiritual concerns, must be shared properly and in 'a good way', so as not to cause harm in a cultural context. Respectful protocols had to be developed for communicating cultural—and sometimes sensitive—knowledge in an appropriate manner and for providing clear instruction on how

to be respectful in the use of that knowledge.

Other aspects of the website were clearly established in that initial meeting, based on design elements that reflected Sq'éwlets' personal and collective experience of their home and surrounding landscape. Sq'éwlets wished to share the feeling of the mountains and rivers of their territory and the colours of their two rivers where they combine, as the muddy waters of the Fraser are joined by the clear, dark water of the Harrison. And so these elements became incorporated to give the website its look, feel and sense of identity.

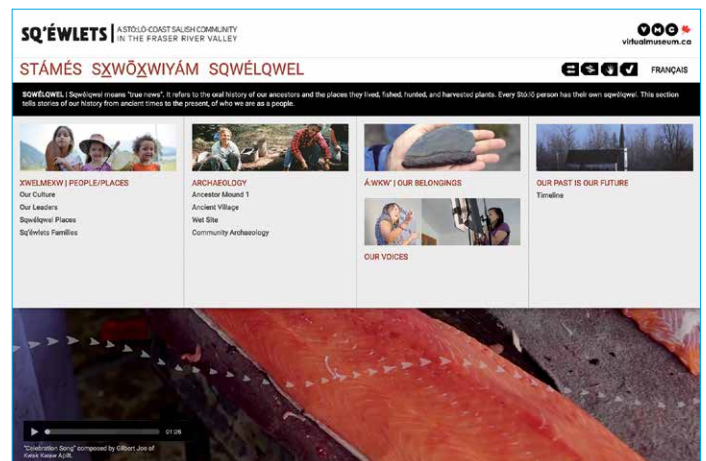
Worldview and belongings

The whole framework of the website reflects a Sq'éwlets and Stó:lō worldview for embedding cultural objects, including the Halq'eméylem language and structuring principles such as *tómiyeqwo* (intergenerational relations) and *shxweli* (interconnected spirit; life force). Two explicit elements of the site structure are *sxwōxwiyám* and *sqwélqwel*, as core aspects of oral history. These principles are central to a Stó:lō-Coast Salish model of health and wellbeing, and are factors of interconnectedness between people, places and things. These concepts, and the cultural protocols that flow

from them, help to maintain a balance in this system, as 'objects' are placed and understood within them.

Artefacts filtered through this worldview become *a:wkw*, which means belongings. This transformation of artefacts into belongings embeds these objects in a culturally meaningful place, in both the physical and digital realms. Artefacts are things divorced from—or largely unattached to or disconnected from—people, place and culture; they are certainly not things that are alive to a Stó:lō perspective on where these belongings come from. The term 'belongings' was created during the production of a recent museum exhibit, a collaboration with the Coast Salish Musqueam First Nation.² Musqueam Elders applied the Hun'qumyi'num term *?elew'kw* to emphasise 'the continuity of intangible forms of knowledge that are intrinsically connected to belongings as opposed to artefacts or objects. Belongings even as fragments connect contemporary Musqueam people to their ancestors and their *sneweyət* (teachings received since childhood).³ Stó:lō communities in the up-river area, including Sq'éwlets, speak a different dialect and have adapted the term *a:wkw* to represent their artefacts, which have often been referred to as 'treasures'. In the case of the Sq'éwlets website, use of the term

Archaeology and belongings are 'placed' in the context of sqwélqwel, and connected to the website sections Xwélmexw—People/Places, Ye Sqelxwále Tset—Our Voices, and Okw'ellexw te S'iyólewéthet Tset—Our Past is Our Future.



'belongings' connotes connection and continuity to community through the thousands of years that these belongings represent. This continuity bridges past and present. It brings relevance and meaning to community connections. And it helps to structure the organising principles of the website.

In the context of this article, we ask: what if Stó:lŦ worldview flowed back into the organisation of collections, where belongings are stored in institutions and museums according to a framework that is not Halq'eméylem, when they're dealing with Stó:lŦ belongings? What would happen? Imagine the cultural collision and outlook for the certainty of the world around you if there was a sudden influx of a Stó:lŦ worldview and a Halq'eméylem linguistic framework that changed the way things were organised and stored. If you were a curator in that system, what difficulties would you have in grasping how things were classified and located, and how would you find them? If that system were applied without consent or instruction, you'd be lost inside it. But such disruption, to put it mildly, is representative of the ways in which colonial paradigms have affected Sq'ewlets and other Coast Salish and Indigenous Peoples over the past 150 years.

So on our digital platform, objects are represented as belongings (re) organised in this Indigenous cultural framework. It brings back to balance the health and wellbeing of a system that was in place a long time ago, and that continues today. As you navigate the website you see very clearly and right up front Halq'eméylem terms, including *stámés*, meaning 'about' (the site); *sxwŦxwyám*, the distant past and the time when *Xexá:ls* (the Transformers) were travelling the world, transforming people into the mountains and other things in making the world right; and *sqwélqwel*, the personal histories of the people and relationships to the land and environment and surroundings (see above).

These are the primary sections that can be explored. You can then dive into these sections to find a map and pronunciation of *sqwélqwel* places and to hear community voices expressed in video and audio. In the section Our Voices—Ye Sqelxwále Tset, video mini-documentaries provide a means for Sq'ewlets people to talk about their lives and perspectives on their own being, self-identifications, and relationships to the land (see p. 67). This provides authentic cultural 'place-ment', context and meaning to cultural objects as belongings, within *sqwélqwel* and the lives of

Xwélmexw people and place. Thus the results of archaeology undertaken in partnership at Sq'ewlets are *placed* in an Indigenous frame of reference of the people, shifting the focus from an outsider's worldview to a local and culturally situated one.

Outcomes and teachings

Teachings are what we were aiming to achieve from this project. Teachings derive from history, with an outlook on respectful relationships, continuity and a strengthening of identity. As Grand Chief Clarence Pennier says: 'to know where you are going, you have to know where you've been'. In one of the mini-documentaries in the Our Voices section, Sq'ewlets member Johnny Williams Jr says: 'We are still here, we are still alive, we still have our culture'. We did not want to perpetuate a colonial perspective—of time and history—in the framework of this website and its contents. The perpetuation of foreign, colonially based structures and institutions is all too pervasive in the governance and institutional systems of the contemporary society that surrounds Sq'ewlets and other Indigenous peoples today. The Our Voices section of the website is very important in contextualising Sq'ewlets' belongings and in articulating relationships between the Elders and the youth.



Elders' voices express teachings that bring relevance and meaningful foundation to the material culture embedded in the site. These Elders speak directly to the youth. Linking this connection to the language are words such as *siyá:m* (leader); these words connect deeply embedded aspects of community relationships to outcomes of the archaeological work. The youth are given information that allows them to understand several connected concepts: the meaning of that word (and many others); how highly respected people were taken care of in the past; and what it means to be a modern-day leader, carrying forward teachings and maintaining continuity and connection between the past, present and future.

To observe protocols for sharing knowledge and to provide a clear context for the knowledge presented on the website, we used a series of traditional knowledge (TK) labels. These were developed by Sq'ewlets project team members with Jane Anderson and Kimberly Christen, who had initiated them as part of the intellectual property and cultural heritage project Local Contexts.⁴ On the website, the TK labels clarify aspects of knowledge that are particular to different types of belongings. For example, the TK label *xá:xá* represents secret or sacred knowledge. It specifies what kind of information about ancestral human remains, cemeteries, and associated belongings we can share. It's a way of

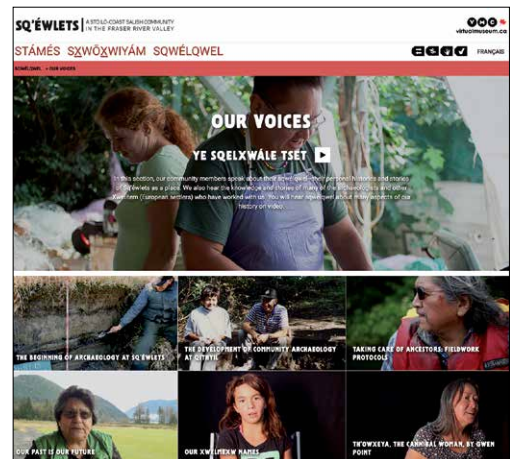
setting both a standard and a barrier to what can be released publicly and what needs to be held within the community or privately. Another TK label is outreach, *s'íwes*, referring to knowledge shared to educate Stó:lō and non-Stó:lō about the teachings of this community. S'íwes means education and teachings.

A classroom resources section of the website provides lesson plans, produced in collaboration with local educator Sheryl MacMath. These bring together knowledge from different areas of the website for the purpose of sharing it in classrooms of students of different ages. The lesson plans introduce much-needed local Indigenous content into the public school system, some of it for the first time in both British Columbia and Canada.

Conclusion: the future of the object

The purpose of this project was in large part to bring together and build an understanding of belongings relevant to the specific history of the Sq'ewlets tribe and to present them within a Stó:lō–Coast Salish worldview that is meaningful and representative of the Sq'ewlets community. As part of this representation, we situated ancestral belongings digitally in this worldview

The webpage Our Voices—Ye Sq̓elxwále Tset provides a platform for presenting community-based perspectives and teachings, bringing relevance and meaning to cultural objects as belongings.



in order to perpetuate, but not replace, Stó:lō knowledge. The website was also used as a platform to provide teachings that convey Sq̓éwlets identity and intergenerational continuity. Connecting the stories of people, places and things/objects was a direction, objective, and outcome of our project. We worked to portray belongings relationally—through story—and establish a basis for the authentic perpetuation of knowledge and meaning derived from Sq̓éwlets—Stó:lō—Coast Salish people. In a broader sense, our aim was to advance health and wellbeing in the community. In our view, the brightest future of the object is rendered through the meaningful and culturally authentic connection of its past to its present. The collision of cultures in this context leads to teaching, learning, understanding and betterment of relations and wellbeing. La ho:!

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- 1 www.rncommunity.org.
- 2 Jordan Wilson, “Belongings” in “č̓asna?əm: The city before the city”, *IPinCH (Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage Project)* blog, 2016, www.sfu.ca/ipinch/outputs/blog/citybeforecitybelongings, viewed 27 March 2017.
- 3 Reese Muntean et al., ‘?elw̓k̓w̓ —Belongings: Tangible interactions with intangible heritage’, *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 59–69 (59).
- 4 www.localcontexts.org. See also Jane Anderson and Kim Christen, “Chuck a copyright on it”: Dilemmas of digital return and the possibilities for traditional knowledge licenses and labels’, *Museum Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, nos 1–2, 2013, pp. 105–26.

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