

Collaboration Is Only a Tool to Decolonize the Museum

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- 1 By now it is an old, familiar story: The modern museum is the inheritance of colonialism.
- 2 Starting in the 1500s, European powers began a massive project to explore and conquer the world (Barringer and Flynn 1998; Bennett 1995). As they encountered new people and culture they needed new ways to catalogue, categorize, and understand them. This was partly driven by theology, partly by politics, largely by power: Were they new peoples human and could their non-Christian souls still be saved? Who and how should these peoples be ruled? And how could their labor and land be most effectively conquered and controlled for the benefit of Europe's elites?
- 3 The new encounters inspired by the revolution of global exploration were also based in part in honest curiosity: Never before had Europeans been confronted with such a dizzying range of human bodies, beliefs, and practices. Where did these people come from? How did they live? Why did they do what they did?
- 4 How European explorers pursued these questions impacted tribes such as the Hopi of Arizona in the Southwestern United States. As early as the 1540s, Spanish explorers arrived at the Hopi villages, igniting centuries of colonial turmoil (Sheridan et al. 2013). Into the early 1900s, the Hopi people were already among the most studied and collected by the new science of museum anthropology (Whiteley 1997). Drawing a straight line through nearly 500 years, we arrive in Japan at the National Museum of Ethnology's Info-Forum Museum project. The value of this project is well worth exploring, both in terms of how it redraws the values of the museum and strengthens the Hopi tribes' efforts to be a good steward of its heritage (Kuwanwisiwma et al. 2018). Before we disembark in Japan, however, more historical context is needed.
- 5 Centuries ago, to answer their questions, European explorers first collected unsystematically, on whims and opportunities (Cole 1995). A war ax traded for a gun; a ceremonial dress exchanged for a string of Italian beads; a gold pendant pilfered during a raid. These were added to curiosity cabinets of the rich and powerful in Europe, objects to entertain visitors but also fetishes of Enlightenment ideals that were based on embracing the unknown, exploration, and setting the natural world into neat order (Godlewska 1995; Thomas 1989) (Figure 1).



Figure 1

A cabinet of curiosities. Painting by Domenico Remps, circa 1699.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Domenico_Remps_-_Cabinet_of_Curiosities.jpg>



Figure 2

April 5, 2019 protest by Decolonize This Place at the Whitney Museum, New York NY, over board vice chair Warren Kanders' ownership of Safariland, a manufacturer of tear gas and other weapons.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Decolonize_this_place_040519_whitney_museum_full_image.jpg>

- 6 Gradually, as colonial exploration and domination expanded, so did these cabinets that contained a growing record of humanity's breathtaking diversity. The cabinets grew into sites of inspiration – muses for the colonial dreams of complete control over the world (Pitman 1999). These cabinets became the point of pride for nations competing to rule everything and everyone. Congruent with the aspirations of Europe's elites, entrepreneurs understood that humanity's mysterious origins and organization could be turned into a means of production: money. Zoos, displays, and more became ways to profit from one person's curiosity about another. Yet, people did learn. Soon, museums were all at once enabled by colonial explorations, a means of Enlightenment science, symbols of national pride, businesses, and a kind of university of humanity for the common citizen. For nearly a century, this vision of the museum thrived and lived mostly unquestioned.
- 7 But by the late 20th century, this vision, once so clear and beautiful, became blurred by the mostly black and brown subjects of the museum itself. Rather than seeing sites of empowerment – places that represented their traditions with honor – museums were decried as a mechanism to perpetuate inequality, racism, sexism, blind nationalism, and many more injustices (Yelvington et al. 2002) (Figure 2). Demands for the return of stolen ancestors and sacred objects became commonplace (Colwell 2017). The museum was continuing colonialism, a mechanism to extract from the periphery the cultural ores of identity and belonging.
- 8 Slowly, some museums began to change (Clifford 1997), a so-called "new museology" in which communities were claimed to matter (Hauenschild 1998). Museums that highlighted not the nation but the local community were formed (Karp et al. 1992; Watson 2007). Collaboration, even in the midst of conflict over the ownership and rights of Native communities, became a possibility (Archambault 2011; Bernstein 1991; Herle 1994). Local communities formed their own museums (Fuller 1992; Hoobler 2006). Participation became a real practice (Kreps 1997). So did inclusion (Sandell 2002; 2006). The *source* of objects, stories, and cultures that were the focus of museums began to matter (Golding and Modest 2013; Peers and Brown 2003). So was born the National



Figure 3

Native American Science Career Day at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science in 2010.
(May 12, 2010, photo by Chip Colwell)

Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) – which, although imagined, created, funded, and run by the U.S. federal government at the footstep of the Capitol Building, has become the symbol of Native American empowerment in the museum world. In the end, collaboration conquered colonialism (Lonetree and Cobb 2008).

- 9 Other museums followed suit, including my own, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. When I arrived in 2007, we imaged, created, funded, and ran the Native American Sciences Initiative (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010). This was a program that sought to use the museum’s resources to empower Native peoples, give them a voice in the museum’s work, provide access to the collections, and create new educational opportunities for Native youth and elders. The activities ranged from the Indigenous Fellowship Program, which brings in artists, educators, and others to use the museum’s collections to create new avenues of understanding for Indigenous cultures. We partnered with a local organization to present films monthly by and about Native Americans, shown free to the local public. We created scholarships for Native American college students pursuing a science career (Figure 3). We established a paid internship program for three Native American students to work at the museum every summer. We worked with the Hopi Tribe to reframe how our database systems present their language (Maxson et al. 2011). We worked with the Zuni Tribe to build a “collaborative catalog” that they could control and use (Srinivasan et al. 2010). And more.
- 10 These efforts are those aligned with the NMAI – a mode of postcolonialism (Karp et al. 2006). They seek to undermine colonial power structures and pull back the levers of power that prevent Native peoples from having their own voices and values included in museums.
- 11 These are admirable goals, and have indeed changed how museums view themselves, how they operate, and how they portray Others. And yet, after nearly a decade of this work, I see that in many ways little has changed at all: Museums continue to hold the power. It is museums that invite others in, that gives them honoraria, that decides which projects to pursue and why. It is museums that have massive budgets in contrast to impoverished tribes. It is museums that have the keys to

the storage rooms, and the passwords to the databases (Walker 2015).

- 12 The collaborative movement is at risk of failing. The problem comes down to collaboration is too often seen as the solution to colonialism, instead of a means to overcome colonialism. In other words, so long as a museum is perceived as being collaborative, so long as it appears to share its resources, then it is seen as becoming postcolonial. But collaboration is a mere method – not an endpoint. If we think collaboration alone will overcome colonialism, then we are merely creating a new form of neocolonialism (Boast 2011).

- 13 What does an impactful postcolonial collaboration look like? We can begin by diagnosing the problem further: How do the remnants of colonialism continue to adhere to museum practices, even those that aspire to be collaborative? I would suggest that there are at least five ways.

- 14 First, money and key resources often remain under the control of museums. Grants, endowments, and other substantial financial resources are often more accessible to museums than communities. Then, once funding is secured, grants are controlled and administered by the museums. Although funds might be dispersed to communities, it is the museum staff that ultimately decides how these funds should be used, and underlying benefits (such as overhead costs) go to the museum rather than the communities who need these resources as well. This not only continues to not improve the wellbeing of impoverished communities but creates a power imbalance in which museum staff can (intentionally or not) manipulate relationships to seek the outcomes that benefit them rather than the communities they are working with (McMullen 2008).

- 15 Second, the far majority of curators and museum administrators are not from the communities whose culture and history are the focus of exhibits and collections. The lack of opportunities for Native Americans in particular to pursue a career in anthropology, museology, and allied fields is striking – and highly problematic. The roots of the problem extend from poor educational systems in Native American communities to creating hostile work environments for Native peoples to overcoming the reputation of museums in Native communities which are often seen as not serving the interests of Native Americans (i.e., ambitious and talented Native students are more likely to pursue business, the law, medicine, and so forth). Without Native Americans working directly in museums, it is too often too easy to forget the values, viewpoints, and needs of Native communities. Non-Native museum workers have much to contribute – I don't advocate for a world devoid of non-Native curators – but we also need Native peoples *present*, to be a part of the daily shaping of how museums consider their work with Native communities.

- 16 Third, the kinds of projects and programs that museums create and implement are often meant to serve the museum rather than local communities. New exhibits are meant to draw in visitors to the museum. Educational programs give visitors new experiences and create informal learning experiences to enhance the school system. Collections research help museum staff better organize and research the objects under their stewardship. These are often great, and well done, but they



Figure 4

In 2008, Zuni cultural advisors Octavius Seowtewa and Curtis Quam visited the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, to reinterpret the collections as part of building a collections database by and for the Zuni people called Amidolanne. (April 2, 2008, photo by Chip Colwell)

ultimately advance the museum's goals, not those of communities. They rarely, for example, consider how to draw visitors to Native communities, how informal education opportunities could contribute to Native education, or how collections research could give knowledge back to local community members (Figure 4).

- 17 Fourth, current museum structures create disincentives to collaboration. Most mid- to large sized museums are organized by hierarchies that require approvals for resources and programs from the top down, compared to the more horizontal organization that is required for most functioning collaborations. Curators today in most natural history museums, for example, do not have the administrative authority to refashion exhibits or retool programs; yet, staff in exhibits and programs often lacks the relationships and experiences of working directly with communities. And while curators academically trained in the last several decades will be well-trained in postcolonial theory, many staff members in exhibits and programs from other fields and hence may lack a deep understanding of museology's colonial legacies and the need for such techniques as multivocality. Moreover, many rewards within museums and academia remain focused on individual achievements – articles, books, invited lectures, and so forth. However, collaborations are by their nature against prioritizing the success of the individual over the group. The goals of inclusivity, reciprocity, and democracy are simply not goals that fit well within the modern museum (Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010).
- 18 Fifth, museums often highlight issues that are unimportant to communities. Although they are often positioned within their own communities as trusted institutions, museums rarely take on the most pressing issues of our times – climate change, biodiversity loss, racism, economic inequality and poverty, gender inequality, gun violence, violence against women, and much more (Figure 5). While it might be unrealistic to expect museums to become advocates for every social issue, they



Figure 5

Not enough museums tackle subjects like climate change, as the Field Museum did in 2010.

<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:How_Do_You_Think_We_Should_Tackle_Climate_Change%3F_\(4821619216\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:How_Do_You_Think_We_Should_Tackle_Climate_Change%3F_(4821619216).jpg)>

rarely even take a stand on the issues that should matter most to them and for which they have expertise. Could natural history museums which have zoologists not take a bigger role in public debates about biodiversity loss? Could geology museums not inform the public's understanding of global warming by better sharing the long view of the Earth's climate? Could art museums which aspire to an ethic of cosmopolitanism not engage with organizations that advocate for refugees and immigrant rights? There are a few notable exceptions to these generalizations (Jennings 2015; Sandell 1998) – but, significantly, they are exceptions indeed. In the case of Native Americans, museums, I think, often appear simply irrelevant: They are focused on talking about the past, when Native peoples want to talk about the present and our shared future.

“In the spirit of just transition [to inclusiveness] and responsibility, we will advocate for genuine, reliable, and virtuous collaboration. This is a higher order than many may be concerned with and implies that collaboration involves reaching out and enlightening on equal terms: to decentralize power and leadership and share problem solving. ... The spirit of pure collaboration is righteous and undiluted with hesitancy and uncertainty.”

—Jim Enote (2015), “Museum Collaboration Manifesto”

19 In his manifesto, Jim Enote, the director of the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center in Zuni, New Mexico, lays the groundwork for a kind of postcolonial collaboration. This kind of “higher order” collaboration would indeed rise above the kinds of collaborations that are typically offered today. (Importantly, I don’t want to denigrate today’s collaborations because they have provide a vital step away from the colonial past – it’s just that now it is the time for a big leap away from it.) This kind of postcolonial collaboration requires true equality in power, authority, and resources; it requires mutual benefits that truly flow in all directions and serve the needs of local communities.

20 This sounds great, but what would it actually look like? We don’t know because no one has

invented it yet. But there are hints and whispers in a range of projects. Several collections database projects have provided new ways of thinking about the construction of data around objects, how those data are accessed, and who those data are constructed for (Leopold 2013; Rowley 2013; Srinivasan et al. 2009). At the Sam Noble Museum, curators worked with the Kiowa Black Leggings Warrior Society to create reciprocal systems of power sharing and authority, particularly focusing on the tribe's intellectual property rights (Swan and Jordan 2015). Projects have explored both the potentials and pitfalls of returning digital data back to communities (Hennessy et al. 2013; O'Neal 2013; Reddy and Sonneborn 2013). At the Museum of Northern Arizona, there has been a deep commitment to foster relationships with surrounding Native communities, focusing especially on their values for collections and providing a voice in exhibits (Hays-Gilpin and Lomatewama 2013).

21 The National Museum of Ethnology's Info-Forum Museum project is another very important example. This project has been evolving to become ever more deeply collaborative, and stands out in three key regards. First, the project is focused on ensuring that Hopi tribal members are fully invested in researching the museum's collections; I have been impressed by how much travel between Japan and Arizona has been taking place, which has no doubt been expensive, but ensures that the distance between these places does not become a barrier. Second, the Hopi advisors have been given a real opportunity to give their voices to the collections. So many database collection projects depend on the written word, whereas this one incorporates video. This not only allows for a more fluid and natural commentary, but gives a fuller shape to the collections' interpretation. And third, the intellectual property rights of all the participants are being thoughtful acknowledged and honored. Rather than assuming the museum has the right to the knowledge being shared with them, the museum staff has proactively ensured that the Hopi advisors are not only heard but that their voices will not be appropriated.

22 At the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, considering our Native American Sciences Initiative, the program most aligned with a postcolonial agenda was a pilot program titled the "Native American Museum and Technology Workshop" (Pohawpatchoko et al. 2017). In 2010, we hosted a two-week intensive workshop that brought 10 Native American high school students to DMNS to create a working model for an interactive web interface to complement a diorama of a Cheyenne



Figure 6
Native Science @ DMNS workshop participants. (July 29, 2010, photo by Chip Colwell)

family in the early 1860s (Figure 6). What made this unique was that it was truly run by, for, and with Native American community members. It was dreamed up by Calvin Pohawpatchoko, a Comanche tribal member and a Ph.D. student at the University of Colorado at Boulder; he was assisted by Jerry Lassos, a licensed teacher and Gabrielino tribal member, and Jami Powell, an anthropology student intern and Osage tribal member.

23 Through a competitive application process, 10 Native American students with ties to the Denver area were selected. They became paid interns and garnered professional skills, and also were gifted a laptop. The project to focus on adding contemporary voices to the Cheyenne diorama was chosen by them and seen to them as most important (although one constraint was that the project needed to focus on DMNS). The program also included talking circles, allowing the students and staff to share their experiences about living their Native American identities in today's complex world. When the staff realized that some of the students were interested in going to college but necessarily have all the resources they needed, college recruiters and nonprofits focusing on funding one's college education were brought in. At the end of the two weeks, the students had a working model, which they presented to their families and community members. Standing in front of their community was an act of bravery for many of the students, but ultimately empowered them.

24 In the end, the museum did not use their digital model. On the one hand, this is a perfect illustration of the limits of a single curator's power to effect real change in a major museum; because I don't have authority over exhibits, I could not compel the exhibits department to include a digital screen that would present the student's work. I surreptitiously added a QR code that led to a website showcasing the student's work but after a few weeks, this was discovered and removed.

25 However, on the other hand, what ultimately happened within the DMNS was almost beside the point. The real point was that the project served Native community members: the project wasn't about the museum, it was about the community. The museum was a platform for the community to find a space to consider its past and future, to educate and empower its youth, and allow its teachers to experiment with a new form. This is such an important lesson for museum professionals about postcolonial collaboration: for once, it's not about us.

26 The DMNS' Native American Museum and Technology Workshop was not a success by many measures. But most of the projects I've discussed have been constrained by the legacies of colonialism. Rather than dwelling on shortcomings and failures, though, what I think we must look for in these projects are the seeds of postcolonial practice, which we can tend to so that they grow and flower and flourish. Before we know it, we will be walking through a beautiful wild forest.

27 In an important new book, Bryony Onciul (2015) illuminates how "naturalized inequalities" endure in museum exhibits, employment, relations, and curatorial practices even amid attempts at community self-empowerment and self-representation. The problem is that rarely do museum professionals stop to pause and reflect on how their actions maintain the status quo of inequalities

– and then even when they do pause are not given the tools to change the course of history. Unless we break this pattern, we risk stalling out on the important progress made so far.

- 28 The collaborative model has brought museums so far – finally, out of the shadow of colonialism. But collaboration as it’s currently practiced still too often reinforces existing power structures rather than challenging them. A “higher order,” true postcolonial collaboration will equally share control over money and resources, offer Native Americans positions within museums, ensure that programs benefit Native American communities, shift museum structures that incentivize and reward deep collaboration, and not avoid issues that matter to communities. Collaboration is not the answer to colonialism; rather, it must become a one tool, one method that fundamentally decolonizes the museum (Lonetree 2012). The postcolonial museum will come after collaboration.

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