

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Decolonial Perspectives:
Insights from Afro-Latin Museological Practice

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Culture and Performance

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Decolonial Perspectives:
Insights from Afro-Latin Museological Practice

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Brisa Marie Smith Flores

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor David Delgado Shorter, Chair

Museums are significant mechanisms that contribute to the creation and maintenance of social norms and ideologies. With calls for increased representation, repatriation, and in the most extreme cases complete extermination of cultural institutions, museums are experiencing an unyielding crisis. My project emerges from this crisis and turns to African and Indigenous knowledge systems that present a counter model to hegemonic epistemological practices in museums. I conducted fieldwork in São Paulo, Brazil to analyze the Museu Afro Brasil, as a case study. The case I examine explicitly centers the lives and histories of Afro-diasporic populations. My research poses several important questions: In what ways does colonialism persist in any given museological institution? How can a focus on non-Eurocentric ways of knowing change how museums operate? Can Afro-Indigenous frameworks allow new types of museums to

emerge? This dissertation calls for a paradigmatic shift in how we discuss and understand decolonizing museums. I argue colonial ideals of individualism and universalism are antithetical to decolonial processes and must be replaced by ideologies that center collectivity. I close the dissertation by encouraging museum leadership to reflect on their own unique circumstances and from that reflection develop specific strategies that can assist in their own museological institutions.

The dissertation of Brisa Marie Smith Flores is approved.

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David Delgado Shorter, Committee Chair

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2023

*To my baby brothers, Israel and Ismael
because you gave me a reason to learn about the world.*

*To my Mom and Dad,
because you gave me the confidence to believe I can make life meaningful.*

*To my Erick,
because you gave me the encouragement to do it.*

*To my Uncle John,
because you gave me a guardian angel.*

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VITA

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Black Experience in Latin America and Caribbean I; AFAM/Chicano/a Studies
Afro-Latinos, Blaxicans, and Nuyericans; AFAM/Chicano/a Studies

Introduction

It was something I had never felt before. It was early winter in Philadelphia. The sun had already drifted away, and silence had just enveloped the city. The air and the streets were still. My ears were ringing with the echoes of drums and chanting. The hair on my arms was still raised from the energy of the room. I walked home, and for the entire thirty-minute journey, I cried. I was twenty-three and had just finished working on the biggest exhibition I had ever been a part of. Words cannot capture how profoundly moved I was at that moment. I was a young adult studying at the University of Pennsylvania. By that time, I had worked in numerous art organizations across Philly, but none had ever left me so inconsolable. Each step I took away from the museum led me closer to the realization that I would never experience an exhibition like that again.

At twenty-three, I had dedicated a little under a year to working on a special exhibition called Philadelphia Assembled (PHLA), an exhibition commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. PHLA began in the streets of the city. At the end of a two-and-a-half-year period, it was transformed into a temporary exhibition in the Pearlman gallery space. PHLA was a space for everyone. Within the walls of the Pearlman, stories of “radical community building and active resistance through personal and collective narratives” unfolded.¹ What made PHLA so special was how dedicated the organizers and collaborators were to honoring the humanity of people. PHLA was a political exhibition, but not for the sake of being political or pushing an agenda. The politics of PHLA were not defined by strict societal categories; instead, they were

¹ Philadelphia Assembled, accessed July 31, 2023, http://phlassembled.net/all/blog/philadelphia_assembled/.

defined by the people. PHLA was malleable and empathetic. The look of the exhibition and its values changed based on the needs of the community, and it did so often.

I cried on the night PHLA closed because I never wanted that experience to end. As time passed, I still obsessively thought of PHLA. I wondered how museums could recreate something so precious. I applied to the Ph.D. in Culture and Performance at UCLA to investigate that question. At the time of my application, I had imagined my entire dissertation being about PHLA and its collaborators. With age, my thinking changed. I have abandoned much of what was written in my original personal statement. Still, at the end of the document, I stated explicitly, “I want to explore how a museum can give more power to the artists and community.” This dissertation emerges from this question.

Dissertation Overview

Museums are significant mechanisms that contribute to the creation and maintenance of social norms and ideologies. On-going decolonial projects are crucial to the progress and transformation of cultural institutions. In response to the current climate of racial and social injustice in the United States, activist organizations such as “@ChangetheMuseum” and “#DecolonizeThisPlace” are challenging museums to radically transform their practices and policies. These practices extend outside the United States. Globally, museum policies and practices preserve coloniality when they directly and/or indirectly harm marginalized communities, depend on corrupt funding sources, and reinforce hegemonic Eurocentric ideologies more broadly. With calls for increased representation, repatriation, and in the most extreme cases complete extermination of museums, cultural institutions are experiencing an unyielding crisis. Much scholarship questions the power and social impact museums hold; however, the majority of these interventions continue to center on institutions within the United

States and Europe. My project seeks to discover what can be gained from a redirection towards museological models outside of the Euro-American canon.

Within this dissertation, I examine limits and opportunities related to decolonizing museological institutions. I unpack how Eurocentric worldviews infiltrate efforts to decolonize museums and in turn, reinscribe coloniality. I illuminate the significance of specific contextualized strategies when working toward decolonial futures. I propose museum leadership must divest from unilateral relationships between themselves, collected materials, and the communities they serve. To explore how museums might divest from Eurocentric worldviews and unilateral relationships, I analyze the Afro-Brazilian museum, Museu Afro Brasil, as a case study. Museums created by and for Afro-Indigenous communities implement many different and impactful museological strategies that center their own cultural worldviews. From these non-Westernized worldviews, new possibilities materialize, and those who experience them can imagine new decolonial futurities.

Methodological Lineage

Rather than just think through decolonial theories, I write this dissertation with the hopes to activate decolonial praxis. The methodological frameworks that I depend on are interdisciplinary. The well-being of all beings and the refusal of colonial hegemony are at the core of all the methodologies I employ. As an academic learning through decolonial approaches, I purposefully refuse to present universalizing claims and neat endings. My research and writing style in this dissertation are influenced by my desire to actively be in solidarity with all colonized people.

Most of my dissertation is written in formal academic writing. I have included periodic autoethnographic accounts to make visible my particular and personal perspectives that impact

my analysis. In “A Borderland Methodology/*Una Metodología Fronteriza*,” David Delgado Shorter substantiates that complexities and confusions are generative components of research. In the article, he uses autoethnographic writing to exhibit how his own moments of confusion and “not knowing” led to his academic, personal, and community development. Autoethnography contextualizes my experiences and thoughts in relation to the theories and histories I examine in my work. Autoethnography also makes visible my own biases and circumstances. Rather than present as an expert, I use autoethnographic writing to situate myself as an individual in relation to other scholars, colonized people, and colonial systems. The goal is not to inundate my dissertation with self-indulgent writing but rather to demonstrate the emotional, physical, and intellectual interconnectedness I have with these communities and this topic more broadly. Additionally, this process makes hyper-visible the subjectivity and personhood of my writing.

I rely on borderland methodologies as they consider power dynamics, agency, and are not bound to false binaries, capitalism, nationalism, or institutional religion. Shorter explains borderland methodologies must include the researched community, remain open to expansion, be adaptable, and leave room for not knowing and possible correction. This openness and collaborative framework allow researchers to contend with intersubjectivity, complexities, and messiness without having to provide a conclusive resolution.² Most important to my research is his focus on the viability of coexistence between contradictions, without a need or ability to develop resolutions. The nature of this project deals with the unknown of a world beyond colonialism. As a young scholar with so much life ahead of me, I welcome my inability to put forth definite resolutions relating to “how to decolonize.” Instead, I hope this dissertation can put

² David Delgado Shorter, “A Borderland Methodology / *Una Metodología Fronteriza*,” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, (2020) 19. DOI: 10.1080/17442222.2020.1781367

forth useful examples and questions to support those interested in engaging more deeply with decolonial praxis. Additionally, this dissertation works to affirm and recognize the under-discussed circumstances of Afro-diasporic populations in the Americas in relation to colonial violence and decolonial futurities. Rather than put forth solutions, I use borderland methodologies to encourage empathy and care for more colonized people.

I discuss colonized groups in relation to each other because care and empathy are central to my work. Relational approaches to race research challenge theoretical frameworks that suggest racialized groups are discrete entities that are unrelated and bear singular and distinctive attributes. In the academic anthology, *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*, the authors argue that racialized identities, experiences, cultures, and histories are always constituted through relationships and dependent on shared fields of social realities. The authors demonstrate that research should examine these sociocultural intersections to refute the practice of reinforcing a white-Other binary in academia. My dissertation aims to earnestly think through and alongside the interconnectedness of Afro-diasporic and Indigenous world communities. By employing relational frameworks of race, I hope to destabilize my own claims to expertise and instead develop methodologies that are best equipped to honor and discover nuance and complexities within this work. The case I examine explicitly centers the life and histories of Afro-diasporic populations. In order to disentangle the complexities of socio-racial colonial ideologies, I incorporate global Indigenous peoples even though they are not in direct conversation with each other.

Indigenous scholars such as Bagele Chilisa, Queeneth Mkabela, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith argue that to subvert and challenge coloniality in academia, researchers must understand and employ knowledge systems most salient to their research communities. I engage with

theories produced by global Indigenous populations to practice intersectional approaches which subvert colonial hegemony. While I do not belong to any Indigenous nations, my interest in producing decolonial work necessitates I center on Indigenous needs and realities. Within this project, I will use the term Afro-Indigenous, especially in relation to epistemologies and ontologies. I place the hyphen between the “Afro” and the “Indigenous” to demonstrate these communities are inextricable from, in obligation to, and in solidarity with one another. The hyphen also serves as a visual marker to remind the reader that these communities are often one in the same and that these identities exist on a spectrum between the Afro and Indigene labels. By bringing African and Indigenous worldviews together, I aim to honor: 1) African Indigeneity, 2) Indigeneity within and beyond the Americas, and 3) Afro-diasporic and Indigene diasporic decolonial solidarity.

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) are my methodological guide. I have organized my chapters according to three salient pillars of Afro-Indigenous worldviews: healing, collectivity, and particularity. These pillars influence how I have written the chapters that follow. Since I am part of the African Diaspora, and my case study is situated within and amongst people of the African Diaspora, I think through African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. This methodological approach lessens linear and distant research practices which reperform colonial violence against researched communities and their knowledge.³ AIKS also informs the theoretical arguments of my dissertation. Through centering AIKS, my research poses several important questions: In what ways does colonialism persist in any given museological

³ Bagele Chilisa, "Indigenous African-Centered Ethics: Contesting and Complementing Dominant Models," In *The Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, 10. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009. doi: 10.4135/9781483348971.

institution? How can a focus on non-Eurocentric ways of knowing change how museums operate? Can Afro-Indigenous frameworks allow new types of museums to emerge?

Theoretical Lineage

My research is an extension of four major fields of study: Art History, African Diaspora Studies, Latin American Studies, and Decolonial Studies. While I engage with theoretical frameworks from across disciplines, I will use this next section to highlight scholars that have heavily influenced my thinking about my dissertation. I also briefly discuss the ways my research contributes to these already well-established fields of study. Many of the scholars that follow are not directly referenced within this dissertation but are paramount to the foundation upon which this research rests. Without the intellectual genealogy of the people within this section, this dissertation would not be possible and for this reason, I write with their scholarship in mind.

Much of the scholarship that addresses the experiences of Afro-diasporic peoples in Latin America necessarily focuses on systemic oppression. Since the study of Afro-Latin populations is still relatively new, key texts concentrate on the ways Afro-descendants are denied/absorbed into Latin American societies or on the issues of identity and race politics in Latin America.⁴ African populations and their descendants in Latin America have experienced centuries of cultural erasure and appropriation. In “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race,” Juliet Hooker explains, unlike their Afro-diasporic kin to the North who were racialized through ideologies of the “one-drop rule” and Jim Crow segregation, Afro-descendants in Latin America were immediately integrated and absorbed into the racial and

⁴ Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, "From Carolina to Loíza: Race, Place and Puerto Rican Racial Democracy," *Identities* 20.5 (2013): 616-632.; Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, eds. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

social schema of Latin American life.⁵ To unify their nations, Latin American governments work to diminish the racial categories and establish one shared national identity.

A shared national identity negatively impacted Afro-populations two-fold. Firstly, as Afro-communities were incorporated into the new national identity, they were expected to abandon their cultural and racial identities to properly assimilate into the new social order of their respective nation-states. In most cases, this shared identity was linked to the nation-state itself or the more culturally ambiguous *Mestizo/Mestiço* identity. Regardless, through an acceptance of this shared national identity, citizens and elites began to make claims to their new nations' diverse racial and cultural histories. *Mestizaje/Mestiçagem* was a vehicle to address the multitudes of races and ethnicities within each nation-state and implied post-racial nationhood where all people co-existed. Sociologist Mónica Moreno Figueroa argues this process was still equally as violent and racist as U.S. segregationist strategies.⁶ This absorption was not a product of equal incorporation or celebration, but instead, this absorption worked to consume and eradicate non-white cultures, histories, and arts.

Cuban Art Historian Gerardo Mosquera demonstrates through concepts of *Mestizaje/Mestiçagem* and syncretism the contributions and pervasiveness of “African-ness” was either white-washed or appropriated by the greater nation.⁷ *Mestizaje/Mestiçagem* or syncretism were able to facilitate this process because through the ideology of racial/ethnic mixing, Latin American populations were able to use their national identity as a means to not only

⁵ Juliet Hooker, “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2 No. 2 (2014): 188–201.

⁶ M. G. Moreno Figueroa, “Distributed intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism,” *Ethnicities*, 10(3), (2010) 387-401.

⁷ Gerardo Mosquera, “Africa in the Art of Latin America,” *Art Journal* 51, No. 4 (1992): 30–38.

acknowledge the “African roots” of their nation but ultimately claim it as their own.⁸ In other words, being one race, the “mixed” or Mestizo/Mestiço race, conveniently permits officials and the general population to make the false claims that “we are all mixed” and thus we are all Afro-descendants. The components of Afro-cultures that could not be assimilated were then co-opted by white elites to demonstrate racial and cultural democracy in Latin America. By “celebrating” Afro-cultures, Latin American governments were able to perform as an inclusive and post-racial nation without necessarily having to incorporate actual Afro-descendants.⁹ Using dance and music as an example, countries like Brazil or Puerto Rico were able to praise and invest in cultural forms like samba or salsa, respectively, on an international platform, while delegating non-Afro-descendants as the ambassadors or producers of these forms. The ideology of racial mixing and nationalism also equally impacted Indigenous populations in Latin America.

Though Latin American nations were presenting a unified front, Afro-descendants were still understood and treated as a subclass of humans. Critical sociologist Calvin John Smiley explains white supremacy portrays the “Black body as a controversial subject” to assert dominance and maintain control. He demonstrates through the transition of the Black body from private enslaved property to “autonomous” citizens, institutions of racism used laws, imagery, and narrative to shape a society that surveilled, villainized, and criminalized Black bodies to continue to validate the need to regulate them. Smiley connects the Black body to a history of display, indexing, and violence, specifically discussing the ways racial taxonomy developed during the European Enlightenment and the auction block on which enslaved peoples were

⁸ Rivera-Rideau, "From Carolina to Loíza," 620.

⁹ Ibid, 624.

exhibited, abused, bought, and sold.¹⁰ This sort of representational practice existed in all realms of life, from literature to visual arts, from colloquial conversations to academic discourse.

This history of anti-Blackness illuminates the cultural significance of Afrocentric institutions within Latin American countries. Despite hundreds of years of forced assimilation and syncretism, Afro-diasporic people continued to forge spaces that preserved their own unique racial and cultural identities. Art Historian Bridget R. Cooks demonstrates Afro-diasporic peoples' reach for African aesthetics and cultural artistic practices to participate in cultural and political unification of peoples across the African diaspora. She argues that through Pan-Africanist ideology, peoples of African descent are able to work toward liberation or political freedom which centers racial solidarity and identification across ethnic and regional differences. In "Youth Culture, Diasporic Aesthetics, and the Art of Being Seen in the Bahamas," Krista Thompson explains the desire to be visually connected across the diaspora is a post-national strategy that rejects national expressions of visibility, culture, and blackness. Thompson demonstrates that visual representation transports identities, cultures, and Afro-diasporic aesthetics across national and cultural boundaries. In the case of the Museu Afro Brasil, this institution functions as a rejection of the Portuguese push toward *branqueamento* or socio-racial whitening. The Museu Afro Brasil and its practice of collecting and exhibiting African and Afro-Brazilian cultural artistic practices is an example of Afro-diasporic peoples reaching across national boundaries to build connection and solidarity with a global Pan-African community. Additionally, the museum as a place to house these cultural materials and racial history also

¹⁰ Calvin John Smiley, "Display, Performance, and Re-Imagining the Black Body," in *The Black Index*, Eds. Bridget R. Cooks and Sarah Watson. Berlin, (University of Chicago: Hirmer Press, 2022), 2-4

serves as an international monument against the anti-Black visual culture that surrounds Black bodies more generally.

A Note on Language: Naming Land & People

Afrocentric and Indigene research interventions have demonstrated researchers should choose to use Indigenous names of peoples and locations in their academic writing.¹¹ This naming actively affirms and recognizes the lives and cultural realities of the communities represented while challenging colonial taxonomies as correct or universal. I work to use Indigenous names for people and land when discussing specific Indigenous communities. However, I do often use the terms, “African” and “American,” throughout the context of my dissertation. I wish to be transparent and honest about my own limitations as a researcher. I write to a general audience about a broad colonial history. These terms are useful markers to help me discuss colonial regions and histories with clarity. Within my writing, I acknowledge these terms emerged from colonialism and are not their original names. I recognize the use of these terms still affirms colonial nomenclature and proves to be a limit to my academic writing.

African

Throughout this text, I examine the histories and experiences of people of the African diaspora. These populations are diverse, and all hold their own unique cultural and social identities that change regionally and across time. I will use the term “African” or “Indigenous African” interchangeably when referring to people Indigenous to the African continent. Status of enslavement or freedom does not impact how I use the terms “African” or “Indigenous African.”

¹¹ Chilisa, "Indigenous African-Centered Ethics," 6.; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (Zed Books, 2012) 158.

I will use these terms when they describe populations of people born and/or living on the African continent. I may also use the term to refer to this population's direct offspring.

Afro-descendant & Black

Black in the English language is often interpreted as the ethnic identity of descendants of slaves in the United States. The term "Black" was created as an act of resistance through the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This political context is not always appropriate for descendants of Africans outside of the United States. Throughout this dissertation, I will use the word "Afro-descendant" to identify people who are born and/or live in the Americas and have a genealogy related to enslaved or free Africans. In some contexts, I will use the word "Black" and "Afro-descendant" interchangeably to situate all people related to Africans, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and/or a larger diasporic community within discourse regarding anti-Black ideological frameworks. I will use "Black" and "Afro-descendant" interchangeably to describe people with African ancestry, regardless of Indigenous status.

Indigenous

Throughout this dissertation, I discuss Indigeneity from a global perspective. When discussing specific people and Indigenous communities, I will use their cultural/ethnic Indigenous names. I will use the term "Indigenous" as a general label when I am discussing larger communities of mixed ethnic/cultural Indigenous backgrounds. I will use the terms "Indigenous Africans" and "Indigenous Americans" to create a distinction between people native to the continent of Africa and people native to the Americas, respectively. In some cases, I will use just the term "African" to define Indigenous Africans without the intention of erasing or minimizing their indigeneity.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation is not a guide on how to decolonize museums. Within this project, I question how decolonial interventions help museums move beyond colonial hegemony. I examine how discourse surrounding decolonization can expand to consider the lived realities of Afro-diasporic populations in Latin America. My analysis avoids universalizing observations or prescriptive solutions. I highlight the importance of pluralistic approaches and socio-cultural particularity. What works in the context of this case study may not work in the context of another case. I hope this dissertation can encourage the reader to expand on what they think is possible and reflect on their complacency in colonial processes.

The chapters of this dissertation are influenced by the three Afro-Indigenous pillars I mentioned earlier in this Introduction. The first chapter works to support a process of healing. Throughout chapter one, I review current scholarship addressing social justice and anti-colonial efforts exercised within museum settings. I argue these efforts are valuable but are not innately decolonial, as defined by scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Bagele Chilisa, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. Current practices of decoloniality in the museum inadvertently and/or systemically maintain colonial hegemonic power structures. Through these colonial hegemonic structures, colonial violence persists, and the colonized continue to suffer. The process of healing requires that we acknowledge what harm is being done and what is the origin of the harm. Healing can only be approached once the origin of the harm is addressed, and the harm has stopped. Museums engage in meaningful and important work toward social change and progress, but this work should not be conflated with decolonization if the harm is not completely prevented. I demonstrate that those interested in earnest decolonial work must be open to acknowledging how

they enact harm onto others and must be comfortable with releasing power to begin the process of healing.

I begin Chapter One by reviewing major progressive interventions employed by museums across Europe and North America. I use online news sources, social media, press releases, and traditional scholarly materials to capture these interventions from across the past five decades. As I was writing this dissertation, many more examples made museum news. I did not attempt to represent every case relevant to my argument. The purpose of chapter one is not to serve as an extensive list of every progressive moment in museums, but rather a snapshot of museological interventions to illustrate trends within the field. I close chapter one by calling for a paradigmatic shift in how we view our ability to see and build decolonial futures.

My second chapter relates to the pillar of collectivity. I begin this chapter by unraveling an ideological lineage between museology and the philosophies of the European Enlightenment. I explain that European Enlightenment philosophies argued for less collectivity and more individualistic thinking and rationale. I posit this ideological shift led to linear forms of relationship building, and in turn, facilitated imbalanced one-directional struggles for power and control. I present a brief summary of colonial history that informs modern-day museology and how linear relations exist within the museum. I build upon the work of scholars like Tony Bennet and Eileen Hooper-Greenhill. I demonstrate ways museums uphold and enforce colonial power. I argue Enlightenment ideals of individualism and universalism are antithetical to decolonial processes and must be replaced by ideologies that center collectivity.

Chapter Three is informed by the pillar of particularity. I introduce the Museu Afro-Brasil in Sao Paulo, Brazil as a case study to thoroughly consider the questions and theories

presented in the first two chapters. The Museu Afro Brasil allows the thorough examination of specific examples that are relevant to the particular colonial context from which the museum emerges. I analyze architecture and curatorial strategies to provide explicit examples of ways museums can construct circular relations. I unravel the historical and social context within which the Museu Afro Brasil was conceptualized and established. I evaluate how objects and didactics are presented to the greater public to challenge colonial hegemony. Some strategies employed by the Museu Afro Brasil may work in multiple contexts and institutions, but the purpose of sharing them is not to present generic universalized decolonial strategies. The reader is encouraged to reflect on their own unique circumstance and from that reflection develop specific strategies that can assist in their own particular institutions.

I have labeled the conclusion of this dissertation “On-going Thoughts” to create space for irreconcilability and potential correction. Within this final section of my dissertation, I lean into questions or limits to my research. I take a more conversational tone within this section to guide the reader through my thoughts. Within this section, I include some transparency as to why I do not discuss land in relation to decolonial projects while heavily relying on “Decolonization is not a metaphor” as a theoretical guide. I believe that land repatriation is a necessary process in decolonization. I assert that land cannot be the only way toward decolonial futures since there are populations that no longer have Indigenous land to repatriate. I close my dissertation not with a conclusive statement but instead with pathways for on-going thoughts to help move decolonial discourse forward.

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Chapter One: Museums, Diversity, and Decolonization

The museum was never a place I knew. I have a few distinct memories in my childhood of museums, but none that include making it into the doors of the building. I do not have memories of class field trips or family outings that included museums. In my undergraduate studies, I majored in art history though I was not the student who could raise their hand in class to boast about all the artworks they had seen in person. The museum world was something that felt very foreign to me. I did not give museums much thought for the first half of my college experience. Even after my junior year, as I began to visit more museological institutions, I did not realize museums were a place where people could work. It escaped me that museums were a business with employees and that these employees make decisions that impact how the museum functions. Despite being an art historian in training, I had naively imagined a museum to be a place where people consumed knowledge rather than a place where knowledge was produced. I thought of museums as neutral places of learning, but I came to understand that what I had thought was wrong.

Museum initiatives invested in social justice are useful interventions to support many marginalized communities, but these initiatives are not enough to effectively decolonize museums. The political and cultural norms within museums are informed by colonial ideologies and maintain museological practices and beliefs that continue to marginalize people. For museums to move toward a decolonial future, they must divest from these colonial ideologies and be willing to relinquish power over marginalized peoples and cultures. Museums play an active role in society, impacting how we construct cultural and social norms. In recent years, more activist organizations and protesters have entered the galleries of museums to question their legitimacy. These organizers have tirelessly worked to hold museums accountable for the harm

they inflict on poor people of color and local communities. If museums do not decolonize and persist as institutions of colonial violence, they will continue to face civil unrest and contestation.

This chapter investigates the efficacy of museological interventions in relation to social justice and decolonization. The first section provides a survey of contemporary museological interventions and their positive influences. Museums have activated curatorial and educational strategies that are innovative in the ways they deal with difficult content and diverse communities. Museums have also implemented new policies which impact their hiring structures and business organization. These policies have led to important milestones in the field. I will contextualize these interventions with scholarship within the fields of art history and museum studies. In the second section, “Limits to Current Museological Interventions,” I will take on the task of critiquing the interventions discussed in the previous section. Within this section, I present a brief overview of the history of the term decolonization. This section works to make visible the challenges museums face in earnest decolonial processes. To illustrate my argument, I incorporate the perspectives of people and communities directly impacted by these museum strategies. I also briefly reflect on my own time working within museums as a Black woman. Museums are institutions that have power, and to move toward decolonization we must be transparent about how this power is used to both support and harm marginalized populations.

Current Museological Interventions

Museums have made many strides to try to change how they operate in order to have a more socially just impact. Museums across the world have worked to diversify their artworks and employees and have begun incorporating more collaborative and community-based programs and exhibitions. Within the past ten years specifically, museums have more actively participated in processes of repatriation. Additionally, more efforts to approach curation and

collections more ethically and empathetically have demonstrated museum professionals' desire to improve the inclusion and representation of marginalized communities.

In 2017, I served as an intern for the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). In this position, I had many responsibilities within the South Asian Art and Contemporary Art Curatorial Departments. While most of my appointment was to serve the marketing, development, and outreach needs of the South Asian Art Curatorial Department, I was invited to work on an additional project within the Contemporary Art Curatorial Department called Philadelphia Assembled (PHLA). Philadelphia Assembled was a special exhibition of the PMA that developed over a three-year-long social-practice project by artist Jeanne Van Heeswijk. During her three years in Philadelphia, Van Heeswijk built relationships with local communities from across Philadelphia's social realms.

From sex workers to formerly incarcerated people, to children, and elders, she asked these local Philadelphians what their dream future looked like for their city, their families, and themselves. Alongside local artists, activists, and community organizers, Van Heeswijk investigated institutional and social barriers to their dreams. Programming, events, and initiatives were implemented to activate their dreams of and for Philadelphia. In the last three months of the project, they brought their creations and experiences to the PMA for all to see and share. I worked with PHLA during the last nine months of the project as a community liaison and digital archivist. I helped to document meetings and programs that took place before, during, and after the installation of the exhibition. On the steps of the building and through the galleries of the PMA's Pearlman Building, I witnessed Indigenous ceremonies, cries of Black spirituals and songs. I listened to poems from sex workers and ate food from transgender home cooks. I was immersed in art from society's most outcasted communities. Over the few months the exhibition

was open to the public, the PMA hosted an unprecedented number of visitors from across the Greater Philadelphia Metroplex. Communities that felt excluded or unwelcomed expressed feelings of belonging and unity. The Philadelphia Museum of Art transformed from just a temple of beauty to a space of gathering and solidarity. To do this successfully, the PMA had to learn how to construct new museological spaces that responded to the needs and complexities of the everyday lives of Philadelphians.

This sort of community-based initiative is not unique to the PMA, as a product of their public nature, their collections, and the new growing accessibility through social media, museums are more frequently engaging in difficult conversations. These discourses are not confined to just what is represented within their collections. We have also seen an increase in academic forums seeking opportunities to engage with these difficult conversations through conferences and organized panel discussions. As a product of the global pandemic, these conversations have increased even more as Zoom and other digital discussion platforms have made constructing panels a quicker and easier process. The museological contact zone then extends into everyday life through digital platforms and conversations and is no longer confined to just the gallery spaces or exhibition programming. An example of a digital contact zone can be seen at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. In October of 2019, the New Museum hosted an event, *Art + Feminism: Wikipedia Edit-a-thon*, where museum guests, artists, and scholars collectively came together to edit, address structural imbalances on Wikipedia, and improve feminist representation in art and the internet.¹

¹ “Art + Feminism: Wikipedia Edit-a-thon,” New Museum Events, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.newmuseum.org/calendar/view/1580/art-feminism-wikipedia-edit-a-thon>.

Large institutions like the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the New Museum are already functioning as contact zones as described by Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford. In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Pratt defines contact zones as the often asymmetrical meeting or “clashing” of different groups. She situates contact zones in contrast to spaces of community.² She argues that a community is perceived to be a self-defined, homogenous group, where the members experience a sense of comradery or interconnectedness. Contact zones, on the other hand, are heterogenous, consist of disjunctured histories and/or geographies, and yet still make possible sentiments of wonder, “revelations, and new wisdoms”.³ Clifford in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, extends the term contact zones and directly applies it to museums.⁴ He argues that museums have the capability to be a space where marginalized communities and museums are able to work together to enhance cultural understanding and exchange. He suggests both the communities and the museums can engage in “mutual” exploitation where they are both able to gain value from collaboration. The contact zone, since its coining in the 1990s, has made its way into museum studies and has fundamentally impacted how museums work to organize their exhibitions and community programs.

In the past 20 years, museums have come a long way from the controversial curatorial practices of “Into the Heart of Africa”, “Harlem on My Mind,” or the MOMA’s “Primitivism.”⁵

² Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone.” *Profession*, 1991, 33–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.

³ Ibid, 39.

⁴ James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones” *Routes: Tavel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997): 188-219.

⁵ Enid Schildkrout, “Ambiguous Messages & Ironic Twists: Into the Heart of Africa and The Other Museum,” In Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*. 168-176, 2012.; Bridget. R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*, (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011) 53-85.; James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern.” In *The Predicament of Culture*:

In the case of PHLA, local community members were involved in every aspect of the exhibition's organization, this included the displayed artworks, the food prepared for café menus, and the ambient music for the galleries. Entrance fees to this exhibition were waived. Instead, the public was invited to “pay what you wish,” and a coin jar was kept at the admissions booth for anyone who could not or did not wish to spend their own money. For the first time, PMA had opened its door to the “othered” part of Philadelphia with a “radical welcome,” as the front entrance read. PHLA serves as an example of social justice initiatives with the exhibition space. The following examples demonstrate how social justice can be included in the organizational structures of the institution.

In 2015 the Mellon Foundation published a report in partnership with Ithaka S+R, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) which examined ethnic, racial, and gender diversity in art museums across the United States. While the case of gender within museums may seem inclusive as 60% of employees were found to identify as women (though trans and non-binary populations were not included in the survey), in the case of race and ethnicity only 28% of all employees were people of color. Employees of color who held leadership or curatorial positions were much smaller, as only 6% Asian, 4% Black, and 3% Latin American people held these positions.⁶ In 2018 the Mellon Foundation conducted a follow-up survey. There was an increase in diversity amongst leadership and

Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art, 186–214. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁶ The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation “The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey,” July 28, 2015.

curatorial positions across the board.⁷ Though the increased percentages remained dismal compared to their white counterparts that continued to take up 88% of museum leadership and 70% of curatorial and educator positions.⁸

In response to the global Black Lives Matter Movement, museums are rethinking how they can better serve as advocates and allies to communities who have historically experienced racial discrimination. Across Europe and North America, museums have published statements of solidarity. Many museums have made claims to an investment in equity, diversity, and inclusion by committing to more equitable and diverse hiring and collecting strategies. The Metropolitan Museum in New York spent the summer of 2020 developing an institution-wide, 13-point anti-racism and diversity plan.⁹ Within this plan, the Met vowed to engage in an honest assessment of their institution's own racist history and present practices of discrimination and require anti-racism training for all current staff, volunteers, and Trustees.¹⁰

These sort of programs within museums are something that I personally benefited from as a young adult living in Philadelphia in 2016. As an aspiring museum professional working towards my master's at the University of Pennsylvania, I had wanted deeply to gain experience working within a museum. My life circumstances and my parents' inability to pay for my living expenses made unpaid internships and volunteer opportunities virtually impossible. The

⁷ The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation "Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018," January 28, 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "The Metropolitan Museum of Art Shares 13-Point Anti-Racism and Diversity Plan," HYPEBEST, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://hypebeast.com/2020/7/the-metropolitan-museum-of-art-anti-racism-and-diversity-plan>.

¹⁰ Daniel H. Weiss, Max Hollein, and Marina Kellen, "Our Commitments to Anti-Racism, Diversity, and a Stronger Community" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified July 6, 2020. <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2020/the-mets-plans-for-anti-racism>.

beginning of my journey with the Philadelphia Museum of Art was a result of the PMA's implementation of a summer diversity grant for people of color who live in Philadelphia to intern with the museum in the summer. While it was a modest stipend of a little over three thousand dollars, it was enough to help me make ends meet that summer.

Additionally, institutions are also rethinking their hiring practices for full time staff and working to include more opportunities for BIPOC peoples in leadership roles. Within their 13-point plan, The Met has pledged to hire a Chief Diversity Officer, and invest in recruiting, hiring, retaining, and advancing BIPOC candidates and staff across the institution, including curatorial, conservation, and all administrative departments. The plan aims to reevaluate the current structure of Internships and Fellowships to include more fully paid opportunities. In 2019, the Guggenheim celebrated hiring their first full-time Black Curator, Ashley James. James began her journey as the associate curator of Contemporary Art November 12, 2019. Nancy Spector, Artistic Director and Chief Curator stated,

Ashley is a curator who has demonstrated incisive and intersectional thinking about contemporary artistic practice. Her work complements the Guggenheim's mission to present the art of today, which we understand as a deep and expansive view of art history. We are pleased to welcome her to the Guggenheim and anticipate a strong collaboration with Ashley as part of our excellent and dedicated curatorial team.

Spector's statement highlights ideas of inclusion and diversity. Her focus on intersectionality and desire to "collaborate" display Spector's and by association the Guggenheim's awareness of the importance of equity. James herself boasted that she was honored to work in an "institution that advances art and culture through rigor and creativity, distinct vision, and a clear commitment to

artists.”¹¹ This moment for many felt important and as a step forward since the Guggenheim notably has not had a full-time Black curator on staff in its 80 years of operation.

A year after the global outcry in response to the death of George Floyd in early 2020, museums across the UK began implementing tangible first steps.¹² Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales has launched a project inviting Black artists to address the colonial narrative around one of their most iconic images, the portrait of lieutenant-general Thomas Picton. They have also published a new digital arts magazine, *Cynfas*, with the first issue centering the celebration of Black people and their contributions to art within the museum’s collections. The National Museum Liverpool has since appointed a historian in residence to help organize a self-evaluation in order to become more transparent in their interpretation work. They also made a commitment to developing the International Slavery Museum as the leading voice for telling stories of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacies.

Even before the racial tension that arose in the spring of 2020, museums were already actively engaging in more reflexive and thoughtful exhibitions. In 2018, Belgium's Royal Museum of Central Africa reopened its doors with major institutional renovations and a new approach to their collections. Rather than completing their renovations in private, the Royal Museum of Central Africa commissioned Contemporary African artists Aimé Mpane and Freddy

¹¹ “Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Appoints Ashley James Associate Curator, Contemporary Art,” The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Press Release, last modified November 14, 2019, <https://www.guggenheim.org/press-release/solomon-r-guggenheim-museum-appoints-ashley-james-associate-curator>.

¹² Geraldine Kendall Adam, “Black Lives Matter: one year on,” *Museums Journal*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/analysis/2021/05/black-lives-matter-protests-one-year-on/#>.

Tsimba, to reinterpret their collection and even the physical building itself.¹³ To contend with the dark and violent history of conquest and abuse, these artists mined the museum collection, examined the architecture, and reimagined what the museum could and should look like. In collaboration with Belgian artist Jean-Pierre Muller, Aimé Mpane developed “RE/STORE.” “RE/STORE” transformed the museum’s rotunda into a space where the colonial past of Belgium was directly confronted by the contemporary and its de/colonial peoples. In this piece, Mpane and Muller constructed semi-translucent veils to hang over permanent colonial statues displayed around the rotunda.¹⁴ Elaine Sullivan in her dissertation “Petit à Petit”: Contemporary Art and Decolonial Horizons in Belgium’s AfricaMuseum,” posits RE/STORE is a project about “a restoration of dignity and a recognition of the need to create a new relationship among peoples, a new collection, and new memories.”¹⁵

In the late winter of 2019 and early months of 2020, alongside a group of UCLA graduate students, the Distinguished Professor Peter Sellars curated *Inside the Mask*, to which I was a contributor. *Inside the Mask* worked to reimagine the museum as a place of encounter and exchange between artists, asylum seekers, activists, and organizers to “propose new choreographies and improvisations of sanctuary and solidarity.” Through the exhibition, the curators worked to liberate masks kept captive, amplify voices that were silenced, and redistribute monies back to impacted Central American immigrant communities. Sellars advocated for all gallery attendants to be paid above minimum wage, to be directly related to our

¹³ Elaine Ericksen Sullivan, “‘Petit à Petit’: Contemporary Art and Decolonial Horizons in Belgium’s AfricaMuseum.” PhD diss., (University of California, Los Angeles, 2020) <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/petit-à-contemporary-art-decolonial-horizons/docview/2476865152/se-2>.

¹⁴ Sullivan, “‘Petit à Petit,” 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 158.

exhibition materials/stories, and to privilege those who were undocumented or formerly incarcerated. While this exhibition was ultimately cut short as a result of the pandemic, for the short week it was open, museum guests were able to hear first hand stories, ask questions, and see the immediate effects of transnational imperial violence. These exhibitions and policies that inform internal administration serve as only a few recent examples of the sort of innovative and thoughtful work museums have been able to produce.

Limits to Current Museological Interventions

Despite being collaborative, socially conscious, holding earnest dialogue, and recognizing difficult histories, museums still hold power that cannot be mitigated by empathy alone. The topic of museums and knowledge production is a well-examined aspect of museum studies. Museum scholars such as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett have written extensively on the ways museums impact how we think and act. Using French Philosopher Michel Foucault's "genealogical method of epistemes," Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, traced the complex relationship contemporary museums have with institutions of collecting and display across a 500-year span. Through maintaining the practices of private collections, cabinets of curiosities, scientific institutions, and the first public museums, she posits contemporary museums have implemented specific techniques to deliberately shape how populations are educated. Hooper-Greenhill successfully unpacks the ways private and elite galleries were constructed to exercise their wealth and glorify their power by flaunting their exclusivity to their visitors and general population. Through the display of rare, priceless objects, collectors advertised a stark economic divide between themselves and those

who viewed the objects; or in the case of private collectors, those who were denied access to these collections.¹⁶

In direct conversation with Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Tony Bennet presents a paradox that is maintained by museums contemporarily. On one hand, museums present themselves as universal and a unifying agent to all people because they house encyclopedic information relevant to all of humankind. On the other hand, museums are very much invested in creating categories and differentiating between types of humans/histories/cultures for display.¹⁷ He highlights this dichotomy is exacerbated further since museums often enforce social behavioral codes and Eurocentric ideologies that often deliberately exclude low-income Black, Indigenous, people of color while simultaneously displaying these same marginalized populations as mythologized, primitive, or culturally inferior. In so doing, museums create barriers for museum access and representation for these populations.

The example of Philadelphia Assembled provides a good illustration of the paradox presented by Bennet. The exhibition was invested in community engagement and equity. PHLA made a positive impact on the people who participated. However, once you stepped outside of the designated exhibition space there was virtually no change to the culture or structure of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In fact, I had received the opportunity to work with PHLA because full-time staff saw it as “too confusing” or “too complex” of an exhibition. They had taken the exhibition so lightly that they had given me, a volunteering intern, almost full control over marketing materials and social media without much guidance or supervision. I felt impassioned

¹⁶ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, (Routledge,) 1992, 72-73.

¹⁷ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (Routledge,) 2013, 99.

to support the mission and efforts of the organizers, but the truth was not lost on me. My passion was a convenient opportunity for the staff in the room to hand off the responsibility. Since I worked in both the Pearlman and main building, I was able to observe how different sections of museum staff perceived PHLA and its collaborators. In the hallways of the main museum, I heard complaints about the types of people that were now around. I witnessed museum staff scoff at the exhibition, questioning its validity and value. I also noticed that few of the new guests and organizers ventured beyond the PHLA exhibition. For interviews I collected in 2019 for a summer research project, I returned to Philadelphia to talk to the people who ran the PHLA Kitchen. In these conversations, the PHLA Kitchen organizers shared moments of being outcasted. Though all the organizers were defined either as artists and/or collaborators within the exhibition, they shared that in most instances they felt most connected and welcomed by the security and service workers of the PMA. These moments made it apparent to me that museums like the Philadelphia Museum of Art were not invested in structural change but rather in performing acts of solidarity to improve their public relations.

Museums and their efforts are valuable to many but are not necessarily capable of meaningful engagement with anti-colonial processes and decolonial struggles. While they can implement programming, initiatives, and exhibitions that strive for social justice, how the museum operates and who is operating the museum remains the same. Dating back to 2016, activist organizations like Decolonize This Place have come together to call for decolonization within cultural institutions. These activists have demanded that museums specifically divest from corrupt funding sources, that they cease the erasure of Indigenous peoples within occupied lands,

and that they invest in marginalized communities directly.¹⁸ Actions that fulfill these demands are much more intensive than efforts to diversify or increase representation. They require a rejection of colonial structures and new museological approaches.

The way in which museums were imagined and how they continue to uphold that imagination creates tension between museums and decolonization. The museum is an institution that articulates authority and knowledge to the greater society. In *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett builds off the work of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and explains that museums employ technologies of power and control. Tony Bennett proposes that museums, and cultural institutions more broadly, are instruments for social and political governing and power. He proves museums are institutions that articulate power and knowledge to the greater society, through what he calls the "exhibitionary complex." In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests in the new age of penal justice, the spectacle of punishment was relocated to the hidden part of the penal system and the deterrent to insubordination became the "certainty" of punishment rather than its pain.¹⁹ However, Bennett argues through the exhibitionary complex objects and subjects that were once enclosed in private domains became displayed in more public and open spaces.²⁰

While the Foucauldian model sought to follow the individual in order to know the general population by making it visible to power, the exhibitionary complex functions through a reversed

¹⁸ Manuel Charr, "Decolonize This Place Targets New York Museums," MuseumNext: Decolonize This Place targets New York Museums, last modified June 4, 2020. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/decolonize-this-place-targets-new-york-museums/>.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. A. Sheridan, (Vintage Books, New York). 1977, 7.

²⁰ Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 61.

logic where the populace was allowed to know and to become subjects of knowledge.²¹ Building directly off Foucault's analysis of the panopticon, Bennett demonstrates cultural institutions, like museums, are constructed to establish a hyper-visibility of the subject, specifically the museum audiences, and principles of order. This hyper-visibility allows the subject to see behavior/social codes, themselves, others, and to be seen by others thus internalizing these gazes as a principle of self-surveillance and self-regulation.²² Even before individuals enter a museological space, they are already made aware of the expectations of what kind of communities, experiences, and perspectives belong and would create disruptions. The messaging from these behavioral and social codes enforced by the museum has historically privileged white, affluent, and well-educated populations as the norm and cultural standard. Privileging rich educated white audiences then constructs an environment within the museum that is innately hostile to peoples who do not fit into these behavioral and social codes.

This hostile environment is the foundation upon which museums have been constructed and these are the technologies that museums are still employing (consciously or unconsciously). Diversifying exhibition spaces or staff positions cannot be sufficient to "decolonize" because these structures continue to privilege colonial ideals. Even when more diverse art, artists, and workers are incorporated, these technologies of power and authority are still functioning uninterrupted in the way they were intended, meaning that marginalized people and arts enter the museum space and are still placed against a backdrop of white supremacy and coloniality. These

²¹ Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum*, 63.

²² Ibid.

peoples and arts continue to be subjected to colonial violence, consciously or subconsciously, because colonialism is the norm.

Returning to the case of Ashley James and the Guggenheim, ultimately sentiment of racial inclusivity quickly subsided as Chaédria LaBouvier began to take to social media. Chaédria LaBouvier is the Black curator contracted to solo-curate “Basquiat’s ‘Defacement’: The Untold Story,” an exhibition centering anti-Black and nation-state violence through the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat.²³ Chaédria LaBouvier was hired by the Guggenheim in 2018 for the exhibition that opened June 21, 2019, and closed November 6, 2019. Around the opening of her solo exhibition, the Guggenheim took to press to commemorate Ashley James as the first Black curator of the institution.

The Guggenheim naming Ashley James as their “first Black curator” reinforces anti-Black sentiments and avoids accountability. Despite the precedent LaBouvier established, the Guggenheim used their social authority to literally rewrite historical facts. When questioned, museum officials challenged LaBouvier’s claims in a statement to *Essence Magazine* that reads, “Chaédria LaBouvier was the guest curator for the exhibition Basquiat’s ‘*Defacement*’: *The Untold Story*, presented at the Guggenheim in 2019. The museum invited Ms. La Bouvier to guest-curate the exhibition in an effort to examine a painful event in the history of our city and the United States, as well as to support and highlight her important work on this topic.”²⁴ Though LaBouvier was hired to solo curate an exhibition full-time, the museum relied on semantics and

²³ Helen Holmes, “The Guggenheim’s First Black Curator Is Denouncing the Museum’s Treatment of Her,” *Observer*, last modified June 06, 2020, <https://observer.com/2020/06/guggenheim-museum-chaedria-labouvier/>.

²⁴ Joi-Marie McKenzie, “Guggenheim’s First Black Curator Calls Museum Out For Institutional Racism And Hypocrisy,” *Essence*, last modified December 06, 2020, <https://www.essence.com/entertainment/chaedria-labouvier-guggenheim/>.

small details to undermine her claim. The term “guest” was weaponized to expose that LaBouvier never belonged at the Guggenheim. While her appointment was temporary, LaBouvier completed all the responsibilities that come with being a full-time curator at the Guggenheim and yet was never meant to be seen as such.

The erasure of LaBouvier was not just ideological but explicit. Not only did the executives at the Guggenheim actively deny LaBouvier’s contributions as the first Black curator, but they were simultaneously benefitting from her curatorial work while excluding her from that process. LaBouvier was not allowed to provide input for the digital audio guide and playlist that accompanied her exhibition. She was not permitted to oversee the de-installation process. LaBouvier was also omitted completely from a public program that consisted of panelists to discuss the exhibition explicitly. LaBouvier did attend the event and spoke out against her mistreatment. In a two-minute video posted on Twitter by the user @BadNewsWomen, LaBouvier heartfully named the treatment she received from the Guggenheim and the Chief Curator as anti-Black violence. She addressed her erasure and challenged the truthfulness of the Guggenheim’s championing of their “first Black curator.” LaBouvier was pitted against fellow Black woman curator Ashley James and risked being labeled as jealous. In fighting the erasure that the Guggenheim was enacting against LaBouvier, she was diminished and placed into an “angry Black woman” stereotype.

Since the fallout of these events, LaBouvier has not worked in any curatorial capacity. On June 3rd, 2020, Chaédria LaBouvier took to Twitter to openly discuss her experience of being recruited by Nancy Spector and eventually working with the Guggenheim. She did not sugar coat how profoundly harmful this working experience had been for her and stated, “Some of you have asked about my experience at the Guggenheim as the first Black curator, woman & creator of the

Basquiat exhibition. I'm still super proud of it. Working at the Guggenheim [with] Nancy Spector & the leadership was the most racist professional experience of my life.”²⁵ The actions of the Guggenheim also negatively impacted Ashley James by casting a long controversial racial shadow over what should have been a rewarding moment in her professional career. Beyond the online news coverage and the passionate confrontation at the panel discussion, the Guggenheim did not face any consequences. Nancy Spector did ultimately resign not because of her treatment of LaBouvier, but instead “to pursue other curatorial endeavors and to finish her doctoral dissertation.”²⁶ After a private investigation into the mistreatment of LaBouvier by law firm Kramer Levin, the Guggenheim maintains that they have participated in no wrongdoing or acts of discrimination.²⁷ In the case of Chaédria LaBouvier the power of the museum was able to control her intellectual work, her financial security, and ultimately her ability to continue to work as a Black woman curator.

Acclaimed milestones of social justice and celebratory “firsts” titles do not give power to the people or communities that they are expected to benefit. While these celebratory claims may or may not be genuine, they are never altruistic. These claims are used to validate the efforts of the institutions and demonstrate their move toward advancement. Museums celebrate these “firsts” and in turn receive positive publicity. Museums get an opportunity to focus on more

²⁵ Chaédria LaBouvier, Twitter thread, June 03, 2020, 08:16 p.m., <https://twitter.com/chaedria/status/1268381115338948608?s=20>.

²⁶ Robin Pogrebin, “Guggenheim’s Top Curator Is out as Inquiry into Basquiat Show Ends,” *The New York Times*, last modified October 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/arts/design/guggenheim-investigation-nancy-spector.html>.

²⁷ Eileen Kinsella, “Veteran Guggenheim Curator Nancy Spector Has Been Cleared of Racial Bias Allegations—But She’s Leaving the Museum Anyway,” *Art World*, last modified October 8, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/guggenheim-nancy-spector-out-investigation-ends-1914195>.

optimistic aspects of their institutions and reframe their long histories of exclusion into a new culture of inclusion. Masked behind these titles of “first” are other adjectives that are more descriptive of the larger systemic circumstance. If a curator of color is the first, then by design they are also the only. In many cases, they are the token. Undoubtedly, they become the “other.” Being alone in any system makes efforts to be heard and supported quite difficult.

The Bronx Museum of Art, in an effort to diversify and improve the culture of their institution, created a new Social Justice Curator position, to bring social justice more at the center of their work.²⁸ Jasmine Wahi was hired as the new Social Justice Curator at the Bronx Museum in early 2020. In an interview released shortly after the announcement of her new position, Jasmine Wahi described her role as a cultural worker that develops exhibitions to evoke dialogue and change toward a more socially equitable and just society.²⁹ She demonstrated pride, excitement, and trust in the efforts and mission of the Bronx Museum and her ability to make a difference in the institution. However, on April 8, 2022, via her Instagram, Wahi addressed her resignation from The Bronx Museum of Art stating,

... I made the decision to part ways with this institution in late 2021, for a variety of reasons. That’s all! Love, A Cultural Worker who believes that Social Justice and Equity needs to involve actively dismantling WSCP [White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchic] structures and engage every aspect of an institution.

Wahi vaguely attributes her resignation to a “variety of reasons;” however, her signature “a cultural worker who believes that social justice and equity needs to involve actively dismantling WSCP” suggests to the reader that the Bronx Museum of Art is not an institution invested in

²⁸ Gabrielle Leung, “It’s Time for Art Museums to Address Their Racist Histories,” Hypebeast, last modified September 17, 2020, <https://hypebeast.com/2020/9/art-museums-steps-to-address-racism-exclusive-interviews>.

²⁹ “Bronx Museum Hires Jasmine Wahi as Holly Block Social Justice Curator,” The online edition of Artforum International Magazine, February 19, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/news/bronx-museum-hires-jasmine-wahi-as-holly-block-social-justice-curator-82212>.

undoing white supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal structures. In the end, Wahi was ultimately unable to make a difference in the institution as she had hoped and promptly decided to move to other career goals. Though the position of a social justice curator was created at the Bronx Museum of Art, wealthy white executives invested in maintaining colonial ideologies have power over any given curator, especially a woman curator of color.

The issues of power and authority are not exclusive to social order and regulation. Museums also position themselves as authorities of truth, knowledge, and education. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains as museums transitioned from these private galleries to public institutions the performance of power was expanded directly to the masses. Through a focus on “universal” or more geographically expansive material collection, museums were able to position themselves as centers of world knowledge and encyclopedic information. As Hooper-Greenhill demonstrates, after the French Revolution, new museum “*programmes*” were implemented to organize and create behavior regulations to help develop the new citizens of the French Republic.³⁰ These programmes were disseminated as more and more aristocratic governments transitioned toward more democratization in Europe. In so doing, museums mobilized their trust and didactic authority to ultimately serve as an instrument of disseminating democratic and national ideologies.³¹ While today the museum isn’t necessarily as inextricable from the central government as it had been in the 18th and 19th centuries, they continue to maintain nationalistic and colonial ideologies to reinforce their own claims to power, wealth, and knowledge.

³⁰ Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” 167-170.

³¹ Ibid.

The production of knowledge and social norms is a process that can be found to be operating in all times of museum history and continues today. Social/behavior codes and epistemic authority are compounded by the ways museum guests are choreographed to move and experience the museum space. Carol Duncan, in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, posits through the physical design of the buildings, organization of the exhibitions, and choreography of the museum visitor, the museum presents an experience that resembles ritualistic processes. This ritualistic experience, independent of the visitor's awareness of it, provokes an internalization and acceptance of the ideologies and messages prescribed by the museum. In conversation with both Hooper-Greenhill and Bennett, Duncan is exhibiting that the museum is an immersive experience that accounts for the intellectual, physical, and even spiritual education/reformation of the public.

James Clifford acknowledges the limits of solely relying on being sensitive, accurate, and collaborative in the curatorial process. He explains within contact zones, "contact work" must go beyond being thoughtful in their approaches. Instead, it should include a sharing of authority with the source communities.³² While both Mary Louise Pratt and Clifford admit to the asymmetrical power relations that exist within the contact zone and in this case the museum, Clifford is calling for museums to distribute power that incorporates the authority and perspectives of the source community alongside that of the curator and/or museum.³³

National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) serves as a powerful case study through which we can consider the limits and successes of contact zones. Through recounting

³² Clifford, "Museums as Contact Zones," 188-219.

³³ Ibid.

her experiences working with the NMAI, Amy Lonetree chronicles the process of establishing NMAI.³⁴ She reflects on the humility and earnest efforts of Indigenous Museum staff while also demonstrating the social and institutional barriers they faced. However, she explains that when NMAI officially opened on the mall, despite the museum implementing strategies like first-person voice and storytelling, she realized that NMAI had missed an opportunity to directly engage and contextualize colonial violence and its relation to Indigenous life and history. Lonetree argues in her book *Decolonizing Museums* that even when museums have been implementing reflective, collaborative, and Indigenous frameworks, they are still capable of reperforming colonial violence and institutional “othering.”³⁵

This type of violence is not necessarily the fault of the curator or any one individual but rather the institutionality of the museum itself. The problem is not just these cultures, histories, and stories are being misrepresented but also the context within which they are represented. Lonetree examined the ways the museum staff were earnest, caring, and collaborative with their community. She even recognized the technological innovations the museum made to properly voice Indigenous perspectives. Despite approaching this work with care, the museum failed to tell “hard truths” within the exhibition. Hard truths as defined by Lonetree entail both the history of colonialism and its ongoing effects. Lonetree asserts hard truths are necessary to move toward decolonizing museums.³⁶

³⁴ Amy Lonetree, “Exhibiting Native America at the National Museum of the American Indian: Collaborations and Missed Opportunities,” *Decolonizing museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. (Univ of North Carolina Press,) 2012. 73-122.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 109.

Hard truths prove difficult for museums because recognizing ongoing effects requires museum visitors and executives to acknowledge their active participation in colonial violence. Museums can frame discussions of colonial pasts as issues that existed in an era disconnected from today. The hard in hard truths would illuminate that much of current museological practices still benefit and are complicit in colonial hegemonic systems. For example, the contemporary Euro-American museum still directly benefits from colonial looting and inhumane collecting practices of the past. Museums have the ability to repatriate cultural materials back to their source communities but commonly do not. Instead, museums flaunt these spoils within collections and market them widely to amass more visitor engagement and donor funding.³⁷ To be able to address the hard truths would require them to expose the ways the institution itself is still presently benefitted from the egregious exploitation of and harm done to systematically targeted communities.

Museums use the term decolonizing as a stand-in for “progressive” or good, but this understanding is an oversimplification of decolonial thought and history. From the early 1900s until the mid-1960s most discourse engaging with decolonization centered on the development of new nation-states and often were responses to the literal expulsion of European powers from their colonies. More specifically scholars and even governmental entities like the United Nations were directly interested in the increase of independent African nations and armed conflict for independence. Frantz Fanon and his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961, extended the discourse further. He described decolonization as a bloody violent phenomenon and posited that real decolonization would require a change of social order where the oppressed

³⁷ Shahid Vawda, “Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality, *Museum International*”, 71:1-2, 72-79, DOI: 10.1080/13500775.2019.1638031

population have complete sovereignty in all aspects of life, not just politics or academia.

Museums and other colonial institutions may rely on reform and small changes to help mitigate immediate acts of violence and provide temporary relief to the victims. However, building on Fanon's logic, if we just amend the current system then a new bourgeoisie or ruling class will replace the old and ultimately maintain the system. To free ourselves from these colonial ails, we must eradicate colonialism completely.

In the decades that follow, decolonization discourse focused more on economic implications and began to address neocolonial practices, capitalism, modernism, and globalization as obstacles that must be rectified. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, discourse surrounding decolonization shifted to incorporate cultural and intellectual practices of decolonization. However, decolonization, as defined by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang is not simply a process of improving culture, society, or community structures, but rather decolonization necessitates the literal repatriation of Indigenous land and life. They explain that educational researchers and social scientists have more generally appropriated the term decolonization to function as a metaphor for social improvement or social justice, often without incorporating Indigenous peoples, histories, or epistemologies. The examples presented above demonstrate that museums are also conflating actions of social justice or community wellness with decolonization. Since settler colonialism is an expansive project that integrates internal and external colonialism, which impacts Indigenous peoples and their land, decolonization must also attend to more than the metaphorical or theoretical correction of colonialism.³⁸ For

³⁸ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." *Tabula Rasa* 38 (2021): 61-111.

decolonization to contend with colonialism then must include returning Indigenous land and way of life.

Decolonization is more complex than just diversifying an institution or even repatriating objects to their cultural origins. Museums continue to hold hegemonic power, as described by Hooper-Greenhill and Bennett. If museums, specifically museum executives and curators, are unwilling to relinquish their power and control, then all of their efforts to decolonize are actively being facilitated through the control of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal structures. If the communities themselves do not hold full power or sovereignty to make decisions for themselves and their materials then the museum, its executives, and curators are still functioning as gatekeepers.

Returning pillaged, stolen, and even possibly fair-traded objects back to their cultural/regional origin is a contemporary tactic for responding to historical violence. Museums across the globe have been actively implementing efforts to accommodate repatriation requests for a variety of different communities and regions. There have been many successfully repatriated objects. In the past 20 years, more institutions have been championing their repatriation initiatives. As a product of repatriation efforts of four major US museums and Italy, the Italian government was able to claim 69 illegally exported cultural artifacts and exhibit them in Rome through an exhibition in 2007.³⁹ In more recent times, institutions like the Fowler Museum, The Metropolitan Museum and the German government vowed to repatriate the

³⁹ Elisabetta Povoledo, "After Legal Odyssey, Homecoming Show for Looted Antiquities," *The New York Times*, last modified December 18, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/18/arts/design/18trea.html>.; Cuno, James. "Culture War: The Case Against Repatriating Museum Artifacts." *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014): 119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483927>.

infamously mass-looted Benin Bronzes back to Nigeria.⁴⁰ The Penn Museum has begun the process to repatriate a collection of over 1,300 unethically hoarded human skulls that belonged to enslaved peoples of varying ages, to support the pseudo-scientific research of eugenicists and white supremacist researchers.⁴¹

When discourse surrounding repatriation takes place, the discussion presents repatriation as a sort of apex to decolonial museological practice. This presumption is not innately true. When objects are returned, they are believed to be under the direct control of their source community. Understandably, if a museum is sending back materials that were collected through colonial and unethical means then colonial ideas of ownership are being undermined. In colonial logic, all materials are objects (including human remains) and objects belong to the one with power and wealth. In the case of museums in the Euro-American context, relinquishing ownership of materials then demonstrates that the power to own is not about wealth or nobility, but instead proximity/relationality. However, the practice of repatriation still maintains colonial structures that are enforced at the expense of source communities.

In November of 1990 the United State government passed Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA requires Federal agencies and institutions that receive Federal funds (including museums) to repatriate or transfer Native

⁴⁰ Sarah Bahr, "Met Museum Announces Return of Two Benin Bronzes to Nigeria," *The New York Times*, last modified June 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/09/arts/design/met-museum-benin-bronzes-nigeria.html>.; Rachel Treisman, "Germany Will Repatriate Benin Bronzes, Plundered from Africa in the 19th Century," *NPR*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/30/992496264/germany-will-repatriate-benin-bronzes-plundered-from-africa-in-the-19th-century>.

⁴¹ Taylor Dafoe, "The University of Pennsylvania Will Restitute a Group of Human Skulls Once Used to Propagate White Supremacist Theories," *Artnet News*, last modified April 26, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/penn-museum-morton-collection-1958672>.

American human remains and other cultural items to the appropriate parties.⁴² The National Parks Service’s official website explains that these federal agencies should approach repatriation by consulting with lineal descendants and Indigenous organizations about the human remains and materials they harbor. Federal agencies are expected to identify, report on, and protect the human remains and cultural materials within their inventories. Failure to complete these actions knowingly is punishable by a fine and/or imprisonment and unknown non-compliance can lead to a smaller civil penalty.

NAGPRA is a law that is made to protect and support the needs of Indigenous people across the United States, but that does not make it decolonial. Laws are colonial structures. Developing and enforcing laws necessitates participation in colonial and imperial systems. In the US context, these systems would be the US government and legal system. The language of the law and the intention of passing NAGPRA placed Indigenous peoples’ humanity at the core of its message. Unfortunately, it also bound Indigenous nations to the US legal system more tightly. Now to collect their ancestors they are expected to call on this law that reifies the same system that disenfranchised Indigenous nations to begin with. Indigenous communities are only protected under NAGPRA if they are federally recognized by the US government. NAGPRA then forces some nations to seek federal recognition and others to be disregarded completely. Additionally, those who are expected to enforce NAGPRA may not be invested in diligent compliance. Meaning, the law itself may be written to affirm Indigenous rights and humanity, but those who enforce this law may not wish to affirm these same ideals.

⁴² “Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act: Getting Started,” National Parks Service, accessed June 24, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/getting-started.htm>.

Even if museums choose to participate in repatriation, the process still can reinscribe colonial violence. In “Lost and Found: NAGPRA, Scattered Relics, and Restorative Methodologies,” Margaret M. Bruchac presents case studies regarding Native American communities that illuminate the ways in which repatriation efforts by museums are not viable or are blatantly colonial. Bruchac contends with the logistical and institutional barriers that were exposed after the passing of NAGPRA. She explains as a product of colonial collecting practices and the minimization of Indigenous peoples as subjects to be studied, disseminated, and collected, many of the materials protected under NAGPRA were scattered, lost, or hard to identify. When NAGPRA was passed, most museological institutions did not have the proper documentation, such as inventories, catalogs, relevant studies, geographical origin, or cultural affiliation. These limits established challenges to the feasibility of Indigenous claims to materials and the ability of museums to repatriate. Museums also are not bound to any timelines or processing procedures and so museums can take years to fulfill repatriation requests.⁴³ Moreover, repatriation is semi-voluntary. If a museum has not been contacted by the source communities, then they can defer to keep the object regardless of the rights or desires of the source communities.

In “Who Owns Africa's Cultural Patrimony?, Critical Interventions,” Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie presents an additional case study that examines more nuanced intersectional issues that impact the source communities. He argues that Western nations are enacting violence against African cultures and peoples by their lack of engagement with African communities within their museological repatriation efforts and their physical exclusion of

⁴³ Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie “Who Owns Africa's Cultural Patrimony? Critical Interventions,” (2010) 4:2, 2-3, DOI: 10.1080/19301944.2010.10781383

African peoples within their national boundaries. African communities experience an “invisibilization” which leads to a deliberate denial of their political participation in cultural heritage claims and repatriation of their cultural heritage.⁴⁴ As a product of Indigenous African communities’ history with European nations, African cultural materials are often several degrees removed from their source communities, and many Western institutions use their power to maintain control of African cultural materials outside of African communities, museums, and political leadership.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Euro-American institutions use their own perceptions of preservation and object care to deny source communities access to their cultural materials. Euro-American museums often claim that source communities lack the facilities and resources to properly care for cultural materials. These claims suggest that Euro-American museums know the proper way to care for objects and that any deviation from their expectations is innately wrong. These claims undermine the generational knowledge held by source communities which informs how they will care for their own cultural materials. These claims also disregard the original purpose of cultural materials cross-culturally. For example, most people cross-culturally do not expect their ancestral remains to be petrified and housed disconnected from their burial practice. Other objects may be constructed with the purpose to be used and even possibly repurposed as they age or degrade. The reluctance to repatriate and the Euro-American museum’s ceaseless preservation of cultural materials and human remains undermines the source communities’ agency over their materials and cultures.

⁴⁴ Ogbechie, “Who Owns Africa’s Cultural Patrimony?” 2-3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Museological institutions use the language of access or inclusive representation to bolster their arguments against repatriation. Museums question if all the Ancient Indigenous materials are returned, then how do the encyclopedic museums of Europe and America answer for not showing antiquities from non-Western cultures?⁴⁶ These concerns can feel disingenuous as most encyclopedic museums place ancient African and Indigenous materials in galleries that evoke notions of primitivism.⁴⁷ Placing Indigenous cultural materials in gallery settings that contextualized them as old and regressive, simultaneously places the Indigenous peoples related to these materials in an imaginary distant past. In so doing, representing Indigenous cultures in the shadow of primitivism is a form of colonial violence and, in these cases, should be disrupted. Repatriating these cultural materials is a form of disruption.

Even if museums display these Indigenous cultural materials in a manner that is constructive, the concern still prioritizes the desires and education of their Euro-American nation-states and audiences. Audiences in the Euro-American context are predominately white and disconnected from these Indigenous communities. In turn, to center, their experience is to disregard the desires of the people in the source community that are unable to get access to their own cultural materials. The argument of representation is not about sharing culture but rather, making the exotic other accessible to the dominant white culture. As cultural critic Rustom Bharucha asserts that the practices of multiculturalism are still filtered through the expectations and benefit of the hegemonic class. In his essay *Interculturalism and its Discriminations*, he unpacks how practices of multiculturalism create an opportunity for cultural material and cultural heritage to become vulnerable to cultural appropriation, an erasure of community authorship, and

⁴⁶ Allen F. Roberts, "Is Repatriation Inevitable?" *African Arts*, Spring 2019 Vol. 52, No. 1, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

commodification. He posits that multiculturalism centers whiteness/Eurocentricity and imagines all other cultures to be peripheral. This framework then reproduces practices and ideologies of colonial conquest as it establishes the norm to be white and the process to become multicultural is intertwined with discovery and learning about the other.

The fight to keep objects also uncovers colonial desires to own the exotic other. Representation can be achieved through a variety of different strategies. Museums have vast resources to construct detailed reproductions. As the access to digital technologies become more accessible, institutions can develop 3D renderings placed on screens or tablets. These examples are only a few of the possibilities, but they help illustrate that the cry to preserve proper “representation” is not about showing diverse cultures but rather owning diverse cultures. Cultural theorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett contends with the ways in which cultural institutions use their dominant power for commodification and control of storytelling and memory. In her book, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes acts of representation across all exhibiting institutions are not mere replications but instead constitute “hierarchies” and “discursive conventions” which “constitute subjects.” Through exhibiting, museums are able to solidify their status as elite while assigning the status of subject or object to the cultures they display.

Euro-American museums which display global Indigenous cultural materials need to prevent the loss of Indigenous objects and remains because they are unable to replenish their supply. In so doing, museums are complacent with the confusing bureaucratic process of repatriation as it supports their desire to hoard objects. The desire to maintain cultural materials also impacts the way museums preserve and care for cultural materials. To demonstrate examples of every culture on earth is impossible, but to present as if you have examples from

every culture on earth is not. When Indigenous materials are damaged or naturally fall apart, encyclopedic museums or universal museums experience a knowledge gap within their institution. A knowledge gap challenges the museum's authority because it disrupts the illusion of a universal museum. In a literal sense, cultural materials are what the museum uses to display control and ownership over the source communities' objects, peoples, and knowledge. A loss of cultural materials through natural deterioration or repatriation directly implies a loss of ownership and power.

The discussion of repatriation is not just an argument of philosophical morality or intellectual discussions about the right to ownership. Museums displacing cultural materials and human remains have a direct impact on the livelihood of source communities. Part of the reason museums claim to fight so passionately about keeping diverse cultural materials is to help their visitors better understand the world around them. Museums attest to the significance of cultural materials and remains. Objects and remains hold information and stories within them.⁴⁸ These cultural materials help people understand more about the source community, their customs, and their lived realities.

Cultural materials that are removed from their source communities take with them the important cultural data they hold. Euro-American museums hoard this cultural data within their collections. Museums are infrequently placed in locations that are physically or financially accessible to the source communities whose materials are on display. The combination of hoarding materials and inaccessibility disconnects the source community from their culturally

⁴⁸ Mary Nooter Roberts, "Does an Object Have a Life," Roberts, Mary Nooter, Susan Mullin Vogel, and Chris Müller. *Exhibition-ism: museums and African art*. Museum for African Art/Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, 1994.

significant data and relations.⁴⁹ Disconnection is more than a longing but rather an act of genocidal erasure. Materials and remains that are captive in museum collections are decontextualized from the regional and cultural framework from which they originated. They are then sanitized and diminished to symbols and objects. When cultural materials are detached in this manner, the historical lineage that was dependent on these materials cannot continue.⁵⁰ When deceased relatives are imprisoned within the collections of a museum rather than their ancestral burial grounds, living family members cannot trace back their familial lineage. When cultural materials are removed, cultural practices and histories dissipate. These moments of disconnection are moments of loss for the source community. The impact of these disconnections is the loss of salient cultural histories and generational knowledge. The loss experienced by the source communities is corporeal and spiritual and difficult to recover.⁵¹ The institutionality of museums, the history of apathy and dehumanization of non-Westernized peoples, and the dependence on bureaucratic structures to successfully repatriate objects serve as examples of colonial structures that undermine the sovereignty of Black and Indigenous communities. Repatriation does not undo the harm that theft and pillaging may have caused. Repatriation has an opportunity to begin reconciliation. However, for source communities, repatriation is not only about cultural materials but also the repatriation of “agency.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (Zed Books Ltd. 2013,) 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ A. Roberts, “Is Repatriation Inevitable?,” 1-4.

⁵² Ibid, 4.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presented a series of examples of interventions that support social justice efforts but ultimately inadequately challenged hegemonic colonial systems. Throughout the first section, I examined the positive influences of policies, hiring initiatives, and curatorial interventions within museums. These interventions within museums are important and help respond to racial tension within museums. They are an example that museum leadership is starting to engage in changing their institution's legacy. Within the second section, I applied a more critical lens to these museological interventions and contextualized them within a discourse of decolonization and anti-colonial scholarship. I incorporated lived perspectives of people directly impacted by museum initiatives and policies to demonstrate the empirical reality of these interventions. I also included some aspects of my own experiences working within museums to make visible my personal subjectivity. Museums have a long road ahead to earnestly decolonize. While museum interventions dealing with diversifying hiring and exhibitions are important, these interventions are not enough to dismantle colonial systems.

Understandably, there may be some discomfort in recognizing that the good work that museums staff and curators are implementing just may not be good enough. Colonialism, just like decolonialism, is bigger than any given individual or even any singular museum. Both colonialism and decolonialism are systems that are constructed from many active elements that consist of many peoples, beliefs, strategies, and technologies. In the case of the museum, the colonial system is made of many parts, including the institution's culture, collecting policies, visitors' expectations, and even who the donors are and their desires. This discomfort is useful to understand our motives and hopes for the work that we do.

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Chapter Two: Museums and Coloniality

My first adult jobs were in museums. The positions I held were never permanent or high-paying, but they gave me access to a world I had never experienced before. This world was one where I could be immersed in art and surrounded by artists. I was able to look at beautiful things all day. I could go to work, walk around ancient sculptures and contemporary photography, and somehow take home money (as little as it was). I often worked on projects that centered Black people and communities of color. I created programming for low-income families and often oversaw the editing of didactics and of marketing materials for “urban” centers. I felt very fulfilled and dearly appreciated. I felt needed and uniquely qualified to execute the tasks I was assigned. Though I enjoyed working in museums and often found myself fantasizing about returning, I had much naiveté that allowed me to have such positive memories.

I was not special; I was Black. I have now invested years of my life in understanding oppression, and I have come to realize that the work I was engaged with was not difficult nor incredibly nuanced. I was tasked with working with the communities that the museum couldn't be bothered with. The museums where I worked had their audience. Those who did not fit within this core audience were the others—the racial others, the economic others, the uncultured others, the uneducated others. Though I saw my positions within these museums as testaments to my qualifications, and to an extent, they were, I also recognize that I was an other who could fit nicely within the museum structure. I sit with many privileges. I am Ivy League educated. I have advanced degrees. I do not have any vernacular accents. My curls can be tamed into a neat bun. My foundation color is beige. Within these museums, I was a safe in-house other that alleviated the burden of anyone else having to interact with the others, and I did so happily.

When I realized just how naïve I was, I became disillusioned with museums. These places that were once sources of joy became spaces of embarrassment and shame. At the same time, I still wanted museums to be a place where people like me could belong. When you love museums but are deeply invested in decolonization, an unyielding tension lives within your heart. Selfishly, I wanted to see how I could make museums better so I could feel less guilty about how much I adore them. Make no mistake, I was not concerned with giving museums a better reputation or convincing people to love them as they were. I wanted to walk around gallery spaces and no longer imagine all the people whose relatives are imprisoned in boxes and display cases. I wanted to stroll through American art galleries and not be haunted by the ghosts of my enslaved ancestors. I wanted to see the museum through a lens of joy and liberation.

The purpose of this dissertation is not about trying to prove not all museums are bad. I understand how one-dimensional that desire truly is. I recognize that I began this dissertation in the same manner that many people enter the world of social justice and decolonization; I wanted to “fix” museums. Fixing things helps people feel better. Unfortunately, feeling better is often a fleeting sensation that only centers the immediate moment and ourselves. If decolonization is approached by centering ourselves, then our work is not about liberation but rather self-gratification. Proving there are good museums holds no virtue since there are in fact bad ones. Though I no longer wish to fix museums or prove there are good museums, I still wonder if we can build something generative through museums. How do museums continue to harm others? Why are museums invested in colonial ideologies? These are the questions I will explore in this chapter.

This chapter unpacks the ways museums practice and benefit from Eurocentric and colonial ideologies. In the first section, I aim to demonstrate why museums would continue to be

invested in colonial ideologies. I implicate museum leadership as active agents in the maintenance of colonial hegemony. I use the “Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums” as a source of evidence that illuminates the beliefs and priorities of museum leadership. Additionally, I survey many ways museum leadership benefits from imbalanced hierarchical relations. I argue that from Eurocentric and colonial practices museums amass power and influence. To decolonize the museum, its leadership must divest from linear relations and the desire to amass power. The second section presents a brief history of European Enlightenment philosophies and examines how European Enlightenment ideologies are interwoven into the fabric of museums. During this era, European philosophers prioritized the self and individualized rationalities. The shift toward individualized ways of thinking and knowing developed into imbalanced hierarchical relationships. I explore the ways museums center their own needs and motives which reinforces imbalanced hierarchical relationships with the art, artists, and communities they work with. I argue that these imbalanced relationships are innately one-directional and linear and in turn antithetical to decolonial praxis. In “How Museums Practice Colonial Violence,” I define colonial and settler colonial processes and juxtapose them against museological practice. To elucidate my argument, I analyze examples from the past and the contemporary era. My final section, “Museums and New Relations,” proposes circular relations as a necessary paradigmatic shift toward decolonial futures. If museums do not actively divest from self-centered and power-centric models of being, then decolonization will be an impossibility.

How Museums Benefit from Coloniality

Museums are not colonial simply because they come from colonial history. Museums continue to be colonial because museum leadership of the past and present actively invests in colonial structures to maintain control and power. Colonialism affords museums and their

leadership power over people, objects, and cultures. Colonialism establishes a clear hierarchy of valuable places, peoples, and things. Colonialism also communicates a well-defined process on how to advance within colonial hierarchies. Museum leadership can divest from colonialism and move toward anti-colonial practices, but they must do so earnestly by relinquishing the power colonialism has given them. Power and the craving to wield and hoard it are fundamental to the maintenance of violent colonial ideologies and practices.

Museological coloniality is the way that Eurocentric frameworks continue to inform how museums educate and organize their institutions. European colonizers validated their self-anointed rights to land and resources by transforming Black and Indigenous people from people to degenerate others. The others were less smart than Europeans. They were less civilized. They were less human. Dehumanizing Black and Indigenous peoples separated European colonizers from their victims ideologically, spiritually, and physically. Colonizers enacted egregious acts of violence and exploitation, and they needed a logic that conceptually made the people who received these acts of violence intrinsically different and inferior. From this conceptualization, a Eurocentric ontology was planted onto new soil.¹ The process of identifying an other is a byproduct of colonial conquest that persists in how museums use their collections and even how museums treat their guests and employees. Othering and other colonial ideological structures are an extension of systemic issues larger than one given individual; however, this chapter necessarily explores how individuals collectively uphold and benefit from these structures within institutions. Colonial structures are not passively inherited by the individuals that make up museum leadership, they are actively reinforced.

¹ Aníbal Quijano. "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad." *Perú Indígena* 13, no. 29 (1992): 11-20.

For the colonizer, the power of the colony is directly related to amassing materials and resources. Similarly, the museum gains power from the materials and resources they amass. Museum leadership is transparent in their desires to amass cultural materials. Understandably, they do not explicitly label their desires as colonial, though they very much are. In 2002, eighteen large-scale universal museums across the world came together to make a declaration on behalf of the need to maintain the universal museum as a standard within collecting. This declaration was drafted in response to Greece calling for the British Museum to repatriate the Elgin marbles, a collection of Ancient Greek sculptures from the Parthenon and the Acropolis of Athens. This declaration was signed by universal museums mostly in Europe and North America - including institutions like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Universal or “encyclopedic” museums are a category of museums that collect art and cultural materials from across the globe. They are interested in representing examples from as many global cultures as possible. Their missions often center education as a major tenant of their work.

The declaration acted as a manifesto to establish a right for these institutions to own and represent cultures other than their own. A portion of the declaration of these universal museums reads, “museums are agents in the development of culture, whose mission is to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation. Each object contributes to that process. To narrow the focus of museums whose collections are diverse and multifaceted would therefore be a disservice to all visitors.”² While the declaration denounced illegal collecting practices and addressed the importance of repatriation, it was firm in its belief that museums not only hold the

² International Council of Museums. "Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums." (2002) ICOM.

right to own materials of diverse cultures but have the responsibility to do so. In this declaration, museums are presented as safe and decontextualized environments for diverse cultural materials. Museum leadership presents their intentions of removing objects from their cultural context into museums as a necessary action to allow objects to be more accurately seen and interpreted in a neutral space.

Collecting practices of museums are not about neutrality, but rather control over the objects and their histories. Neil Curtis in “Universal Museums, Museum Objects, and Repatriation” contends that universal museums are dependent on Western enlightenment and colonial ideologies rather than their claims of universalism and inclusivity. He succeeds at demonstrating that the logic of neutrality and universality presented in the “Declaration of the Universal Museum” is based on colonial hegemonic practices of ownership and essentialism. Cultural materials have meaning, and these meanings are not neutral. To convert cultural materials and even bodily remains to neutralized versions of themselves or to reduce them to just their formal qualities privileges Westernized societies’ cultural values. Source communities that are forcefully disconnected from their cultural materials cannot make decisions on how their cultures and objects are interpreted and represented within museums. Museums that house these cultural materials function independently from the source community. Messages and concepts surrounding these cultural materials cannot be challenged or questioned because they are separated from their source. The decisions about how these materials and cultures are represented are more times than not unilaterally made by the museum and their curators.

Decontextualized materials become an essentialized visual symbol for the culture or people in general. In the mid-1980s the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) put on a show called “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art.” In this show, artworks from across different Indigenous

communities were put on display next to modern artists of the time. The objects were not evaluated or analyzed from their own cultural nexus but instead were used as tools to help the viewer understand the “mastery” of the western artists. In this exhibition, the diverse and unique Indigenous groups represented in the exhibition were flattened into simplified “primitive peoples.”³ Their histories and identities were streamlined into a curated experience of “affinities”⁴. Despite the visual diversity that exists amongst artworks from these Indigenous communities, the visitors of “Primitive” were messaged as all fundamentally the same. These objects served one purpose. They were not displayed to teach about their own qualities, but rather they existed only as an example of how these basic primitive forms were elevated and matured through the work of modern masters. In "Objects of Knowledge: a Historical Perspective on Museums," Ludmilla Jordanova argues the decontextualized nature of objects within museums evokes visitors to superimpose their own experiences and “fantasies” onto the object. In an attempt to reify and internalize the object’s significance, westernized audiences call on their own perceptions of value and beauty. Rather than see the object’s significance from the perspective of the source communities, visitors inscribe their own ideologies onto it while simultaneously being informed by Eurocentric worldviews. Museums privilege subjective and often inaccurate mimicry of realities rather than truth or fact. This mimicry often leads visitors to reinforce stereotypes rather than developing a nuanced understanding of the non-westernized other. Stereotypes affirm colonial ideologies of white/European superiority.

³ James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern.” In *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988,) 186–214.

⁴ Ibid, 191.

In Dan Hick's *The Brutish Museum*, he argues that the museum places an emphasis on difference and perceived notions of modernity to organize their collections. During colonial conquest, collectors, anthropologists, and looters saw objects as "things" to be known and owned. Hicks explains these objects experienced a transformation or a "thingification" that stripped them and their source communities of autonomy and agency. Objects then became didactics to tell "object lessons" which reinscribed the values and beliefs of Western dominant groups. These object lessons also placed non-westernized peoples into ideological taxonomies of primitive, barbarous, and discoverable. Through colonial collecting practices, non-westernized artworks were celebrated not for their own cultural, aesthetic, or technical merit but instead as emblems of conquest and trophies of ownership.

Only non-westernized objects experience this level of thingification. European sculptures, crafts, and paintings are presented as fine arts. Though they are still things within museums, these European things are refined and beautiful. They are priceless and irreplaceable. The artworks that emerge from Western Europe are not representative of entire populations or peoples, but rather are symbols of themselves. "The Starry Night" is a painting representative of the skillful artistry of Van Gogh, it is not a symbol of "Dutchness" and Dutch people. Museums encourage the viewer to infer that the works of European artists are so complex and nuanced that complete comprehension of the group and their history would be impossible through just one object. They dedicate entire galleries to precise time frames, European regions, and even "old masters". Contrarily, museums use non-westernized objects to be representative of the whole.

Museum leadership argues their interpretations and cultural influence are necessary and positive. The signers of the declaration attributed international cross-cultural artistic understanding as the product of diverse collecting practices within museums. They state, "The

universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artifacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public in major museums.”⁵ The directors of these universal museums claim that international interest in global ancient civilization is a product of encyclopedic collections. The word “admiration” explicitly calls on the reader to infer that all ancient civilizations are beloved and equally important to the common person, independent of their own national or ethnic background. Despite the empirical evidence that museological interpretation reinforces pro-white/European ideologies, the tone of this portion of the statement presents museums as altruistic keepers and distributors of knowledge.

When museums exotify cultural materials and champion unmatched “neutral” intellectual spaces, museums gain more cultural and even economic authority. If museums can collect rare and coveted materials, they can entice more visitors to visit. More visitors increase tickets and thus increase income and social attention. They can request more donor contributions to accommodate new viewership or to care for the coveted materials. They can defend their self-importance because of the population of visitors and presence of positive press. More popularity makes funding and grants more accessible. More donor and grant contributions increase endowments and income. They can build equity within their collections. They can rebrand and rebuild their institutions. The value of their buildings and collections will increase. They can negotiate with more institutions for loan agreements and collaborations. Generally, their social influence increases as they can present themselves as more legitimate institutions based on the breadth of their collection and the size of their financial endowments. These resources provide social and financial power to the institutions that house them and the people that are affiliated

⁵ International Council of Museums. "Declaration of Universal Museums."

with them. Colonial structures are not just byproducts of past colonial ideals, instead, colonial ideals and practices are consciously maintained daily by museum leadership to continue to hoard wealth and social capital.

Museums are invested in power, not altruism. In the declaration, museum directors openly claim, “Museums are agents in the development of culture.” Identifying as an agent in developing culture links museum leadership to their awareness of their power in influencing society. Museums amass cultural materials to be the steward of histories and literal physical possessions. They fight to remain “agents” because they wish to control the agency over these materials and knowledge. When their authority is questioned, like in the case of the Elgin Marbles, museum leadership leans on the language of altruism and “universal admiration.” Museum leadership employs a language which centers the greater good to insinuate that the source community is only concerned with its own self-interest. This language constructs a false binary between the selfless museum and the selfish source community. Implicit to this language of universal appreciation, is that the source community is incapable of representing their own cultural heritage “to an international public.” Museums rely on a rhetoric of universalism to present as if their desires are not self-serving but instead a service to all people. Museum leadership frames their missions as dedicated to humanitarianism and philanthropy, but they continue to function as business organizations with their own financial and political motives.

Museums take advantage of their positive reputations and use their proximity to colonialism to have power over others. Museums are understood to be positive for society because of their proximity to colonial ideals. Museums emerged from a colonial context where they were constructed to educate the masses in alignment with the desires of the nation-state/colonial elite. Though the messaging has changed forms, museums taught and still teach the

importance of the nation-state, the power of capital, and the elitism of European whiteness. Even with efforts to diversify collections and staff, in general, colonial indoctrination is consistent within museums today. The general reception of museums in society is positive because the governments and elites who define the funding and representation of museums still benefit from these teachings. Of course, people across the world challenge museums, but like universities or other institutions of edification, museums are generally understood to be places of education and distinction. Museums prioritize their own self-interests and hide their motives behind a veil of universality and altruism. Using the language of universalism is directly related to Eurocentric ideals that were distributed across the globe through colonial expansion. Museums reinforce these ideals because these ideals serve their ability to build financial, social, and cultural power.

European Enlightenment and Linear Relations in Museums

Colonial hegemonic practices within museums come from a philosophical lineage of European thinkers prioritizing new ontologies and epistemologies that center the self and individualized ways of thinking. During the 18th century, European elites entered an era of self-proclaimed enlightenment. Across the 17th and 18th centuries, more and more Europeans began exploring the world and seeing new ways of life. New imports of goods and agriculture were also making their way onto European soil. From all this newness, new ideas began to emerge, and Europeans began to recontextualize how they understood themselves and society. By the early 1700s, Philosophers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot started to question the old ways of Europe and wanted to build a new more modern era.⁶ These

⁶ William B. Warner, "The Enlightenment: A (French) Restoration." *The Eighteenth Century* 54, no. 3 (2013): 415–419. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24575090>.

philosophes pontificated about rejecting tradition and old antiquated ways.⁷ These thoughts were the lifeblood of what is now understood to be the European Enlightenment.

The European Enlightenment abandoned ideas of magic and mysticism for strictly practical approaches to understanding the world. A focus on rationality implied a rejection of the irrational. During the European Enlightenment, all things that were originally accepted were expected to be reevaluated and challenged. As French scholar Diderot explains in the *Encyclopédie*, “all things must be examined, debated, and investigated with exception and without regard for anyone’s feelings.”⁸ These extensive processes of examination, debating, and investigation were the ways European Enlightenment thinkers worked to uncover the truth. A disregard for feelings and the irrational was their attempt to cast away subjectivity which could contaminate the truth. The irrational as defined by these *philosophes* was phenomena or beliefs that cannot be confirmed or challenged with evidence. These irrationalities would include common human experiences, such as emotions and religious faiths. Objectivity and reasoning were paramount to the pillars of the European Enlightenment.

The European Enlightenment moved people away from traditional ontologies informed by irrationalities affirmed by religion or superstition toward more individualized ways of knowing oneself. In 1784, German philosopher Immanuel Kant published his short essay entitled, “*Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklaerung?*”/Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment.” In his text, Kant argued that for man to evolve from immaturity into a new

⁷ Warner, “The Enlightenment,” 415-419.

⁸ Marvin Perry, et. al., *Sources of the Western Tradition*, vol. II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 43-6.

rational mature status, man must first refuse external influence and authority.⁹ Kant specifically was challenging the influence of large external institutions like Christianity, but his philosophy also encompassed any sort of institution that was informed by tradition.¹⁰ Ultimately, he argued that the only reliable authority is one's own understanding or reason.¹¹ Kant and those like him wanted to see the European man progress into a refined existence. A focus on nonage and irrationality was naming a socio-cultural naivete that could only be escaped through sensible thought uninfluenced by peripheral power structures.

European Enlightenment developed into an amalgamation of individualist ideologies and pro-rational rhetoric as brought forth by French philosophers and European scholars like Kant. These European philosophies established ideologies of "universal reason" and modernity.¹² European Enlightenment communicated that if one could be rational then they have equal opportunity to enter into mature and modern status.¹³ Those who were not able to think for themselves and leave the antiquated ways of tradition behind were seen as infantile and primitive.

Though the European Enlightenment was just one of many enlightenments happening across the globe, the thoughts and ideas of these European men influenced how cultures and

⁹ Immanuel Kants Werke, "*Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklaerung?*" Volume IV. 1783–1788. Edited by Dr. Artur Buchenau and Dr. Ernst Cassirer. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer 1913. 167–176 and 538–539

¹⁰ K. M. George, "European Philosophy and Enlightenment." In *Paulos Mar Gregorios: A Reader*, 1517 Media, 2017. 33–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1tm7hk0.7>.

¹¹ George, "European Philosophy and Enlightenment," 35.

¹² Sebastian Conrad, "Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique." *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 1005-1007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23427878>.

¹³ George, "European Philosophy and Enlightenment," 35.

institutions in Europe and the New World are structured today.¹⁴ Museums rely heavily on the philosophical frameworks developed through European Enlightenment. The construction of the encyclopedic museum is directly informed by Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, so much in fact, these museums adorn the name of "encyclopedic" museums. Ideologically these institutions align themselves with the Enlightenment beliefs presented within Diderot's articles. As he explains, "the aim of an Encyclopédie is to bring together the knowledge scattered over the surface of the earth, to present its overall structure to our contemporaries and to hand it on to those who will come after us, so that our children, by becoming more knowledgeable, will become more virtuous and happier; and so that we shall not die without earning the gratitude of the human race."¹⁵ Claims of collecting scattered global knowledge and guiding generations into "more knowledgeable," "more virtuous," and "happier" existences, reflect the sentiments echoed in the Declaration of the Universal Museum written in 2002.

These claims upon first glance feel generative; however, the concerns of those who claim them are not earnestly considering the well-being of all people. Neither the Enlightenment nor the encyclopedic museum is invested in universal harmony or acceptance. The use of the words "all" and "universal" does not imply an inclusive celebration of all types of epistemologies and reasoning, but instead one reasoning for all people. Written within these pages of the *Encyclopédie* are ideological tropes of colonial conquest. Amassing knowledge "scattered over the surface of the earth" to be interpreted and disseminated by European thinkers through European logic diminishes those who are the creators of the knowledge and undermines their agency to control their knowledge. European Enlightenment doctrine was inherently hierarchical

¹⁴ Conrad "Enlightenment in Global History," 1025-1027.

¹⁵ Denis Diderot, (1755) "Encyclopédia", in D. Diderot (ed.) *Encyclopedie*, vol. V, Paris. (translated by S. Clennell).

and reserved only for the elite of European society.¹⁶ Those who diverged from this universalized approach were outcasted and marginalized by society. Though the contemporary era is hundreds of years away from the European Enlightenment, institutions and people that internalize these ideological frameworks are still able to amass power and maintain self-affirming structures.

The colonizer suggests his actions are for the greater good of humanity, but history has demonstrated the true purpose of any colonial decision is to satisfy the colonial ego. Colonizers explore new lands to amass natural resources and colonial territories. Colonizers engaged in trade with African nations to traffic humans for labor production. Colonizers converted Indigenous peoples to Christians to amass colonial subjects. Throughout the history of colonialism, what is presented as neutral and even altruistic has resulted in the self-absorbed gain of the colonizers. The purpose of collecting and disseminating knowledge is less about the greater good and more about “earning the gratitude of the human race.”

When relations are approached with the self and personal advantage at the center, then these relations are inherently one-directional. One-directional approaches are about extraction and exploitation and are antithetical to decolonial logics. These one-directional approaches form a line moving toward the self but not back out to those the self is interacting with, which in turn constructs a model of linear relations. Indigenous scholars across the globe have written extensively on the ways linear relations impact research and academic scholarship. Bagele Chilisa in “Indigenous African-Centered Ethics: Contesting and Complementing Dominant Models,” proves that through Euro-American individualistic ideologies, researchers hold power

¹⁶ George, “European Philosophy and Enlightenment,” 34-35.

over their researched community. This power is maintained since the self-interested researcher dictates and authorizes the distribution of the researched community's narratives without equal consideration of the desires and needs of the researched community. In "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture" Queeneth Mkabela explains linear approaches to research produce negative results, even when the researcher is collaborating with their researched communities. In these instances, the researched communities are perceived as biased or intellectually ill-equipped to present their own solutions to their problems. The researcher is seen as a sort of intellectual or literal savior and thus the research community is understood to be dependent on the researcher. Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, determines that research is not necessarily innately the aggressor against Indigenous populations, but rather the problem develops from the colonial context in which research questions are conceptualized and the research plans are designed. If the context is dependent on linear relations then it has no other outcome than to perform colonial violence. These logics also work when applied to museological structures and ideals.

Museums cannot approach decolonization without unsettling linear relations and power imbalance. Within a colonial logic, the entity closest to the colonial ideal (read white European elite) is the entity deserving of power and ownership. This colonial logic consumes all aspects of life and extends beyond the tangible and into the spiritual and intellectual. Museums' desire to collect materials and knowledge is guided by self-fulfilling purposes (i.e., funding, social capital, etc.). While amassing the tangible and intangible aspects of people's cultures they are simultaneously objectifying the community as a whole.¹⁷ These communities are no longer

¹⁷ Bagele Chilisa, "Indigenous African-Centered Ethics: Contesting and Complementing Dominant Models." In *The Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, 407-425. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009. doi: 10.4135/9781483348971.

conceptualized as autonomous and agentive living beings but rather as tools to assist the museum in achieving its end goal. Within the exhibition space, these communities experience another layer of objectification as their cultures, materials, and realities are transformed into literal words, images, presentations, and five-sentence descriptions on marketing materials. These condensed forms of representation are created to be disseminated and reproduced at the whim and benefit of the self-interested museum.¹⁸

Linear relations plague museological community collaborations and engagement. Even when museums claim to value the needs or ideas of the source communities, these needs are transmuted to account for the museum's policies and expectations. Museums make decisions informed by their own best interests first. Museums use their policies and finances as excuses to privilege their self-interest and to challenge the viability of the needs of their community partners. In turn, even when they claim to care about the needs and desires of the communities they serve, this care only exists so much as it does not infringe on their own wishes. Museums communicate their dedication to their own self-interest by constructing limits within bureaucratic and colonial systems. These systems are reinforced by the museum or a larger colonial system, like a nation-state government. Nevertheless, when museums are able to show support, their support often comes from a top-down approach. In these cases, decisions are made within the museum and passed down in hierarchical order.

Linear relations are also articulated through the physical attributes of the museum. Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach demonstrate museums employ an architectural vocabulary that draws

¹⁸Queeneth Mkabela, (2005). "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture." Qualitative Report, 10(1), 178–189.

on ceremonial structures, colonial institutions, and nation-state symbology.¹⁹ They argue this architectural vocabulary messages to the museum visitor that the museum, like temples, shrines, and palaces, is a space of authority.²⁰ Through the physical design of the buildings, organization of the exhibitions, display of objects, and choreography of the museum visitor, museums construct particular “iconographic programs.”²¹ In the case of the universal survey, the iconographic program tells a linear history of progress and demonstrates the wealth and power of the state.

Museums maintain linear relations because it affords them the ability to accumulate power and exercise that power over others. Historically, buildings like palaces and temples were spaces where people entered with humility. The meek human entered temples to ask the mighty gods for guidance. The servile peasant entered the palace only to serve the royal elite, or they did not enter at all. Museums construct a similar relationship. The ignorant public enters to be enlightened and cultured. The museum does not engage in an equal exchange with the public. Museums house all the cultural and artistic materials and in turn, they hold all the knowledge. This unequal exchange perpetuates a hierarchy and reinscribes linear relations. The public is conceptually beneath the museum as they are the ones seeking what the museum has. This linear relation is not only about the museum amassing the materials and knowledge for their own personal gain but also they are distributing these materials and knowledge to affirm their power over those who seek what they have. Linear relations are the foundation upon which all acts of

¹⁹ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach. "The Universal Survey Museum." *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (2004): 51-70.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 22.

colonial violence rest. If power and control are held only at the top of a hierarchy, then those who wield this power are able to do so with impunity.

How Museums Practice Colonial Violence

Museums contribute to colonial violence contemporarily because of the way they reinscribe colonial ideologies and relations. The notion of conquest has evolved since the 15th and 16th centuries. Museums are not getting onto boats and claiming land and people as their own directly. Museums do engage in contemporary forms of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism involves the displacement of the other to allow the settler/colonizer to take their place in society. As Patrick Wolfe describes in “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” settler colonialism consists of negative and positive technologies of genocide.²² The negative and positive technologies should not be interpreted as bad and good technologies. All technologies of colonialism are violent. These technologies are processes or strategies that serve the settler/colonizer in different ways. Negative technologies are subtractive processes that invisibilize and annihilate Indigenous existence. Positive technologies are additive processes that use the colonizer to replace and appropriate Indigenous existence.

Wolfe describes negative technologies as a form of elimination. Negative technologies necessitate the removal of the other. In the colonial American context, the other signifies Black and Indigenous people and their cultures. Collections and the materials museums house can also serve as a form of removal of the other. Scattered and detained bodily remains of Black and Indigenous peoples eliminate these colonized people from existing outside of the walls of museum collections. When museums collect remains, they are removing deceased people from

²² Patrick Wolfe. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

their source communities while simultaneously denying the source communities the opportunity to care for their deceased relatives in culturally appropriate ways. On one hand, the practices of care and burial are eliminated as the source communities lose the people that belong to these cultural practices. On the other hand, source communities experience a literal reduction of bodies outside of the museum. The land and culture experience a palpable void created by the absence of deceased ancestors and cultural materials more generally. In so doing, museums participate in negative settler colonial technologies that disrupt Black and Indigenous way of life and existence.

The positive technologies replace the existence of the Indigenous person with new societal norms. In the positive settler colonial context, museums become new colonial landmarks and monuments placed on top of Black and Indigenous peoples, metaphorically and literally. In the American context, the physical land upon which museums rest is also an example of this positive process. Museums themselves are not the sole reason that Indigenous peoples are displaced from their ancestral territory. Museums built upon Native land do participate in their erasure. In place of actual Indigenous people, museums provide replications and references to Indigenous communities. In most cases, within the exhibition space, Indigenous arts and materials are contextualized through didactics written by mostly white curators. In other cases, they may omit Indigenous existence in totality, leaving only a shrine to Western cultural expression and art. Generally, museums present themselves as the new experts on the cultural other in place of the actual communities representing themselves.

These negative and positive settler technologies often happen simultaneously and function to hyperbolize the value of European whiteness. White elites would obtain material culture from the societies in which they were colonizing and bring them back to the colony as

spoils of war. These items were then either kept by the ruling class of the colony or given to the crown to become part of their private collection. Commonly, these foreign cultural items, and sometimes people, were paraded around by elites to each other as novel and bizarre curiosities of the non-European world. Due to the colonial belief system, Indigenous, Asian, and African cultures were often depicted as less sophisticated. They were understood to be less human and more animalistic. In turn in art and art spaces they were depicted as more closely connected to nature, magic, and bestiality than that of the European.²³ Whereas ancient European and contemporary European cultures were emblems of civilization, thought, and progress, non-Western cultures were seen as the complete opposite.²⁴

Museums depicted and contextualized non-Western artworks and cultures by emphasizing their connection to their five senses and a sort of natural mystical power that comes from their proximity to Animalia. Friedrich Schiller in his study of aesthetics in 1792, provides a great example of this practice of othering. He suggests that “as long as a man is still a Savage aesthetic enjoyment occurs by means of touch, taste, and smell, rather than through higher senses of sight and hearing.”²⁵ This statement is of course in contrast to Western cultures that he assumes are capable of using their “higher senses”.²⁶ Most museums of today do not use this language explicitly, but they still rely on these belief systems.

In many cases of museum collections, white collectors would enter Indigenous communities, interact with their cultural materials, and claim it as their own. Upon their return to

²³ Ivan Karp, "How Museums Define Other Cultures," *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (1991), doi:10.1086/424103, 11.

²⁴ Elizabeth Edwards, *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 206.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

the colony, white collectors could be seen actively representing themselves as embodying these cultures.²⁷ European travelers often commissioned paintings depicting themselves in Indigenous garb or with the cultural materials they had just discovered.²⁸ For example, in the 18th century, botanist Joseph Banks commissioned a painting of himself wearing a Polynesian bark cloth cape after visiting the South Pacific.²⁹ In the image the community that he visited is not represented; in their place is the cape that serves as a symbol of the exotic other. To Banks, the people who had fashioned this cape were only as valuable as the cape itself. He and the cape are decontextualized from the actual source community. In the painting, Banks is depicted as holding up one corner of the Cape with one hand and pointing to it with the other. With this motion, he is directing the viewer to see and acknowledge the cloth as tangible proof of his visits and exploration.³⁰ Rather than depicting himself alongside the communities he witnessed, he has erased them completely. As an act of positive settler colonialism, Banks used his own body to replace the existence of the Indigenous community with himself.

The viewer of the painting can see the mismatch between the white European body and the non-European clothing he adorns. The viewer is able to tell this cape is not his natural garb. He chooses to compose this contrast as a performance to establish the difference between the Western and non-Western. The pointing gesture reinforces this difference. The cloth does not hang on his body but rather he manipulates the object to bring attention to it. Rather than wearing the garb as intended or as any European person may wear a shawl or a scarf, Banks is guiding the

²⁷ Elizabeth Edwards, *Sensible Objects*, 205.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

viewer to understand the novelty of this moment. In the context of the museum and the European visitor who appropriates non-Western culture, the othered artworks are displayed as less sophisticated forms, and by juxtaposing these objects and cultures against the European standard or body, they are hyper-exotified and defamiliarized. As a result, these collectors would take their items and ideologies and display them in exhibition spaces of museums for all visitors to consume and internalize. The racist and othering ideals inevitably became part of the fundamentals of how and who museums display.

Though curators and museum directors are not pointing like Banks, they do provide visual and literary markers to signal to the viewer the novelty of the other. The manners in which museums convey information in the Euro-American context function to replace the unique expressions and worldviews of the non-westernized other. Museums use colonial language to describe cultural identities, practices, and epistemological phenomena. Colonial language often diminishes the cultural complexity and nuance of non-westernized life and people. The purpose of colonial language is not to accurately represent non-westernized cultures, but instead, this language is used to make the cultural other more consumable for the Westernized audience. The Museum Quai Branly presents a recent example to elucidate this point. The Museum Quai Branly is a French ethnographic museum located at the heart of Paris, right at the foot of the Eiffel Tower. The Museum Quai Branly collects cultural materials “from Oceania to Asia, from Africa to the Americas”.³¹ In 2019, the Museum Quai Branly presented an exhibition focused on the peoples and cultures of Oceania which was aptly named, “Oceania.” “Oceania” was on view from March 12, 2019 to July 7, 2019.

³¹ "Missions," Musée Du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - Production - Musée Du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - Missions, accessed June 15, 2019, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/missions-and-operations/the-musee-du-quai-branly/>.

The Museum Quai Branly presents this exhibition through colonial frameworks using colonial language and geographic markers. The description reads, “a journey across the Pacific to discover the island cultures and peoples of Oceania. From New-Guinea to Easter Island, from Hawaii to New Zealand, nearly 200 works provide an overview of the art of a continent, passing on both traditions and contemporary challenges.”³² Words like “discover” are inextricable from notions of conquest. The “island cultures and peoples of Oceania” are not centers of the Eurocentric worldview. They are others. Others unknown to the common person, who is to be understood as European. For this reason, the island cultures and peoples of Oceania must be found and made visible to the European world. The use of the word “discover” also implicates the museum in the process of colonial “discovery.” Without the efforts of the museum and their collection, these cultures could not be unearthed, and without the museum’s intervention, their existence would remain unknown to the European center.

In place of specific Indigenous identities and land, the Museum Quai Branly homogenizes the diverse cultures they are representing into the geographic imagination of colonizers. The people “from New-Guinea to Easter Island, from Hawaii to New Zealand” have unique ethnic and regional identities. The Kānaka people of Hawai’i are hardly identical to the Māori people of Aotearoa (New Zealand). The colonial histories of the Melanesian people of Papua (New Guinea) have stark contrasts to that of the Rapa Nui people of Rapa Nui (Easter Island.) Oceania as a conceptual framework is a product of colonial taxonomy. The museum is most likely not going into the homes of these Indigenous peoples and renaming them. The museum is still participating in positive settler colonial technologies. Their power as institutions

³² "Océanie," Musée Du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - Production - Musée Du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - Océanie, accessed June 15, 2019, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/oceanie-38063/>.

of edification replaces the Indigenous knowledge and naming systems with that of European colonizers. The Indigenous peoples and the land are essentialized into generic “island cultures and peoples of Oceania.” Their unique identities and histories are erased and exchanged with a simplified and exoticized substitute. When distinctive identities are essentialized, museums are able to transmute something elusive, like the knowledge of millions of diverse Indigenous peoples, into something containable and condensed.

Condensing cultures into a European taxonomy encourages visitors to internalize European ideologies. Jordanova would argue that while curators may often present a plurality of perspectives, these perspectives are still limited by the bias of the institution. Curators and museum leadership in general, present exhibitions to support the mission and motives of the museum. While the didactics are presented as objective, they are in fact filtered through the curatorial opinion and then approved by museum leadership. The process of developing an exhibition works to encourage the visitor to perceive the cultures/object in a particular way aligned with the vision of the institution. Exhibitions are not a channel of objective neutral education, but instead, exhibitions are consciously curated arguments. Since museums are often invested in Eurocentricity, many curatorial arguments guide the visitor to exoticize non-European cultures and materials.

The objects put on display are also condensed into simplified versions of their full existence. In “Tradition is Always Now: African Arts and the Curatorial Turn,” Polly Nooter Roberts argues that all objects experience varied amounts of shifts and transformations of meaning and functions throughout time, location, and context. She explains within the museum, objects are frozen in space and time and thus the cultures and peoples they represent are also

presented as static or frozen.³³ Rather than protect the integrity of objects and cultural materials, museums engage in a sort of petrification of cultural materials. Museums benefit from presenting cultures as frozen in time. If museums were honest about the limits of their intellectual conquest, acquiring the fullness of any dynamic culture would be impossible. Rather than being able to collect knowledge and move on to the next thing, museums would have to constantly work to update their educational materials to stay as accurate as possible. If a culture is dormant then so is the history and information that comes from it.

The description of “Oceania” continues, “not a single exhibition anywhere in the world has encompassed the cultures of Oceania in their entirety for thirty-five years. Oceania pays homage – two hundred and fifty years after the first voyage of James Cook in the Pacific – to the artistic creations of a continent composed of 25,000 islands.”³⁴ Here, the Quai Branly is asserting that they have successfully captured the “entirety” of the 25,000 islands of Oceania. The museum’s claims to “encompass the cultures of Oceania in their entirety” reverberates the colonial tendency to not just discover but somehow own everything that they discovered. Through one exhibition, the Quai Branly declares they have miraculously brought two hundred and fifty years’ worth of arts and knowledge from 25,000 different islands to the European visitor in less than 200 works.

Museums are able to amass cultures and their materials and then package them up as expansive exhibitions like “Oceania.” Uncritically, the visitor is expected to trust the information and selection of materials on display because they are presented by a museum. The selection

³³ Mary Nooter Roberts. "Tradition is always now: African arts and the curatorial turn." *African Arts* 45, no. 1 (2012): 1-6.

³⁴ "Océanie," Musée Du Quai Branly, accessed June 15, 2019.

process of these works is informed by colonial desires and imaginations. Benard Cohn argues in “The Transformation of Object into Artifacts, Antiquities and Art in 19th Century India,” that elites of colonial empires used their own value systems and aesthetic biases when choosing which objects and materials belong within their collections. Through their own processes of discovery, classification, and display of non-westernized objects the colonizers successfully impose their own interpretation and values onto non-westernized history and culture. The westernized interpretation and value systems then supersede the values and knowledge of the source communities. While not as tangible as the physical occupation of Indigenous land, the conquest of knowledge and the replacement of who is the bearer of this knowledge is a technology of settler colonialism.

These subtle uses of language are prevalent across institutions in the Euro-American context. Language is not always subtle in relation to museum didactics and marketing. The Museum Quai Branly explicitly presents this exhibition through the lens of a colonizer. The beginning reference point for the exhibition is the voyage of James Cook, a British navigator. The European visitors are exposed to the exotic materials of Oceania through a guided history familiar and situated alongside European whiteness. Messaged to the viewer is that whiteness is all-knowing and is capable of owning and distributing the cultural others at will. The European viewer is also able to participate in their own form of colonial adventure through these exhibitions. In “Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India,” Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Beckenridge suggest museums are a space where local communities can travel a short distance in order to experience “cultural, geographic, and temporal distance.” The museum allows the local visitor to explore the other while being near home. Tourists often travel great distances to experience and to be immersed in cultural “otherness,” but museums conveniently

display the other to make it available to the European center. In the example of “Oceania,” claiming that no other entity has been able to capture the “entirety” of these cultures before now, the Quai Branly is proclaiming to truly experience the “authentic” cultures and peoples of Oceania, the visitors would have to go to the 25,000 islands of Oceania themselves, or conveniently take advantage of the unprecedented exhibition the Quai Branly created. Whether the European settler/colonizer is traveling or staying at home, they both participate within a similar logic. This logic is to affirm white Europeanness as standard and non-whiteness as an other to be discovered.

Museums and New Relations

The problem with self-interested linear relations is the imbalance of power and agency. Linear relations are the dominant way of relating to one another in Westernized societies because of the European Enlightenment and its connections to colonialism. Linear relations are not the only way to relate to one another. In contrast, when the self or the individual is decentered and the collective becomes the focus, circular relations emerge. Indigenous communities across the globe, like in Africa, Oceania, and North and South America share similar principles that inform the importance of circular relations.³⁵ Power imbalances allow higher-status populations to control those beneath them. Circular relations deconstruct hierarchies because they do not maintain a top or bottom. All beings within a circular relation are equidistant from and to the center and each other. Whereas in linear relations the flow of power is one-directional, in circular relations the flow of power is fluid and moves in multiple directions simultaneously.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith draws a map of an indigenous research agenda that helps illuminate this concept. For my argument, what is more important than the specific details of this map are

³⁵ Philip Higgs. *African Voices in Education*. (Juta and Company Ltd, 2000) 71.

the conceptual frameworks she presents through the depiction of this map. The map is derived from Māori world views to represent decolonial processes.³⁶ Smith uses the metaphor of ocean tides within the map to evoke movement and flow. She explains the ocean holds separate smaller localized environments that are connected to the sea. Within this model the directions of the map are not goals or ends in themselves.³⁷ They are processes that inform the tensions between stakeholders across different locales.³⁸ The tides of the ocean radiate out and impact the smaller environments while the smaller environments also impact the waves of the sea. These waves carry on and through the rising and falling of the tides connect to other environments. These processes are continuous. The processes within this map are not sequential since the tides of the waves are radiating across all directions simultaneously. The waves, the smaller environments, and the larger ocean are all bonded within this process.

Circular relations are about collectivity. *Ubuntu* is an indigenous value system that conceptualizes human existence as inextricably related to the existence of others.³⁹ *Ubuntu* is a worldview held by Bantu people, but versions of Ubuntu exist cross-culturally across the continent of Africa.⁴⁰ The idea of Ubuntu can be roughly translated into English as “*I am we; I am because we are; we are because I am.*”⁴¹ This worldview implies that the individual survives only as an extension of the community and the community can only survive as an extension of

³⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (Zed Books, 2012) 120-121.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Chilisa, "Indigenous African-Centered Ethics," 8-9.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid, 8.

the individual. The communal conception of humanity is an essential component of human existence within African Indigenous Knowledge Systems.⁴² The individual and the community are one in the same. Because they are not different, whatever happens to the individual then happens to the community, and whatever happens to the community happens to the individual.⁴³

In both the conceptualization of Māori and Bantu worldviews, the well-being of all beings is centered because all beings are connected. In linear relations, the codependency of humans with other humans and non-living beings is severed. In so doing, the self and its selfish desires can be prioritized at the expense of the whole. In circular relations, the self is not secondary to the group. Circular relations demonstrate that the individual and the community are innately tied. The individual is still an essential component of the relationship. For circular relations to last, the individual must acknowledge their own desires and prejudices. The individual must be willing to be diligent when recognizing their motives and truths. The individual must know themselves as individuals and as components of the group. Self-awareness is important because the self must not act in ways that harm the group, but self-determination honors the self. Furthermore, the group must not act in ways that harm the individual. They are equally precious in circular relations.

Linear relations do not hold the same sense of accountability as circular relations. Within linear relations, only those who are at the top of the hierarchy manage what is best for themselves and the group. Since the flow of power is linear, so is the flow of feedback. Those who are at the bottom of the linear relation become dependent on those who have power. If there are problems that do not directly impact the individual with power, the problems are unlikely

⁴² Higgs. *African Voices in Education*, 182.

⁴³ Ibid.

ever to be resolved. Problems within linear relations are only considered when they challenge or impact those with power. When problems are not resolved, needs are not met, and individual people and the group as a whole suffer. Those at the top of the hierarchy can make decisions that are harmful because they do not see the group or other individuals as equal.

Circular relations prioritize the well-being of all stakeholders even when tensions rise or there are opposing desires. Conflict resolution and accountability come from maintaining the link between the self and the group. When the individual and group are codependent, they are equally invested in developing resolutions. These resolutions are then made in consensus.⁴⁴ Consensus should not be conflated with homogeneity or hegemony. The purpose is not to distill one's reality to create a universalism, but rather to work in cooperation to build the best outcome. Homogeneity diminishes plurality and ascribes one acceptable norm. Homogenized approaches to relating within society are antithetical to African Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Ubuntu creates space for plurality.⁴⁵ Within this African Indigenous worldview, no individual can fully grasp the experience or knowledge of the other. As a result, each perspective must be taken seriously, and thus consensus creates space for alterity, autonomy, and cooperation.⁴⁶

The purpose of circular relations is to acknowledge and affirm through action that all stakeholders (living and non-living) deserve protection, respect, and the power to work toward self-determination. I define circular relations as a set of interconnected relationships (with living and non-living beings) that are equally invested in the sovereignty and agency of each other. Circular relations do not imply all stakeholders (living and non-living) are treated exactly the

⁴⁴ Chilisa, "Indigenous African-Centered Ethics," 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

same, but rather all stakeholders are treated as active agents in their own life and as equally important participants in the relationship. In Chapter Three, I will work to explore how circular relations can exist within museological institutions.

Conclusion

Museums of today are a continuation of a 300-year-long colonial legacy. Modern museum practices are informed by the logic and influence of colonial collectors, visitors, and museum administrators. Colonial ideologies encourage hierarchies between different types of people. These hierarchies fabricate rigid distinctions between worthy and unworthy humans. Colonial ideologies also facilitate a desire to own and know everything. Rather than helping people, hierarchies and amassing objects and information led to othering and deprivation of Black and Indigenous peoples. Museums can disrupt this legacy. I argue to disrupt colonial practices, museums must divest from colonial structures. Museums and their leadership must be willing to center the needs and experiences of non-white/European/Westernized peoples. They must move away from universalized truths and essentialized practices of interpretation and welcome nuanced and complicated lived experiences of the people they represent. Museums and their leadership must surrender their need for power and control to the people and communities that have been harmed by their colonial violence.

Museums are not doomed to be colonial because of their history. In the next chapter, I will introduce the case of the Museu Afro Brasil. I will analyze actions the museum leadership has taken to actively challenge Eurocentric and colonial frameworks. Importantly, I will first introduce the history from which the Museu Afro Brasil emerges to demonstrate that history is not an eternal sentence to colonial damnation. When museums acknowledge how colonialism

informs their institutions and their ways of knowing, particular and effective strategies to subvert colonialism can develop.

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Chapter Three: Insights from Brazil

The architecture of the Museu Afro Brasil (MAB) blurs the lines between the public and the museum. The border between the flora and fauna of Ibirapuera Park feels almost non-existent. The leaves of the lush trees lean in and kiss the building. Within the grass, there are sculptures often adorned with children. The museum feels as if the trees and grass stop at the exact moment the museum begins and not a millimeter sooner. Those who are walking in the park can very easily stumble across the outdoor space of the Museu Afro Brasil and not feel out of place. I loved that the gallery spaces were open and bled into one another. The bleeding between gallery spaces performs an ideological and cultural kinship that these materials and stories share. Whereas in encyclopedic museums, galleries are often siloed to preserve their cultural uniqueness or temporal significance, within the MAB, the distinction between space and time is collapsed. The galleries and materials cannot exist without the presence of the people and materials living in the adjacent rooms that surround them. They bleed because they are connected, ideologically, historically, culturally, and within the museum, spatially. But alas, after some self-reflection and a brief conversation with my chair, I recognize though romantic, these things I loved were not decolonial.

Defining what decolonization is not, happens to be much easier than trying to capture what decolonization is. Frantz Fanon expresses, “Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.”¹ In the first and second chapters, I was able to retroactively look at initiatives, policies, and histories of museums and extrapolate the many ways they have systemically participated in

¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 36.

colonialism. Reflecting on the past is a much more stable means of research because the data is there and unlikely to change. I can identify an action and find evidence that supports my claims because the colonial system has existed and been theorized for centuries. Projection, on the other hand, is a much more daunting task.

I begin this chapter by presenting the perspectives of museum leadership at the Museu Afro Brasil. I evaluate interviews and scholarly articles to demonstrate how the leaders of the Museu Afro Brasil critically approach the construction of an Afrocentric museological institution. The perspectives of MAB leadership demonstrate a departure from the colonial function of museums, which was to serve and represent the nation-state/colony. The MAB is able to depart from colonial museological praxis because it engages in the African Indigenous Knowledge Systems' pillar of particularity as a methodological framework. Particularity is not innately decolonial, but a stepping stone toward decolonial futures. I argue that once circular relations are established then museums can develop strategies that respond to the particularity of their community and colonial context. In the next section of this chapter, I provide examples of specific curatorial strategies that respond to the direct socio-cultural context that impacts the MAB and its community. The purpose of this section is to help provide concrete examples of how particularity can be performed within a museum. I argue that museums must acknowledge and respond directly to their own colonial legacies and center their communities. Through the nurturing of these relationships, new approaches can collaboratively be created and lead to communal participation in decolonial processes. This chapter works to encourage museum leadership to reframe the way they think about decolonial praxis. I hope to encourage museum leadership to recognize that the path forward lives within the unique circumstances of the community and the solutions they have developed.

Particularity and The Museu Afro Brasil

Art was a constant component of the life of visual artist and pan-Africanist Emanoel Araújo. Emanoel Araújo was born in Santo Amaro da Purificação, a municipality in the state of Bahia, Brazil. His father was a goldsmith. At age ten, he went to study as a woodworker. For three years, he was an apprentice under Eufrásio Vargas from whom Araújo learned fine carving techniques.² He spent his early teen years as a printing apprentice working with the Official Press of the State of Bahia.³ By the age of eighteen, Araújo had studied fine art at the Universidade Federal da Bahia. He did not complete his degree because early into his formal education, his professional artistic career had taken off.⁴

Araújo spent the late nineties traveling the world, visiting museums, and learning from the African diaspora. In 1972, he was invited by the US government to come to the United States. During this trip, he explored large museums, met with curators, and for the first time saw some of the inner workings of museums.⁵ Brazil, during this era, had very few museum professionals, and Araújo reveled in the opportunity to see so many ways to organize and run a museum.⁶ In 1977, he traveled to Nigeria to participate in the Second World African Festival of Arts and Cultures (FESTAC). In 1988, Araújo began teaching as a Distinguished Visiting Professor of Art at the City College of New York, USA. Both his trip to Nigeria and the United

² Emanoel Araújo, “Thirty Years of Afro-Brazilian Art,” *Critical Interventions* 9:2, (2015): 149, DOI: 10.1080/19301944.2015.1111001

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “A Conversation Between Adriano Pedrosa and Emanoel Araujo around Afro Brazil.,” *Manifesta Journal* #17, March 26, 2014, <https://contemporaryand.com/fr/magazines/manifesta-journal-17-a-conversation-between-adriano-pedrosa-and-emanoel-araujo-around-afro-brazil/>.

⁶ Ibid.

States deeply impacted Araújo as an artist and as an art collector because he developed meaningful relationships with people from across the diaspora who were critically thinking about Blackness and global Afro-diasporic identities.⁷ Over the span of decades, Emanuel Araújo amassed an expansive collection of art from across the African diaspora.

Curation became a mechanism through which Araújo could internalize and share his connection with Africans and other Afro-diasporic populations. Though he did not produce his first exhibition regarding Afro-Brazilian themes until 1982, he had been collecting art objects and thinking about them in a curatorial sense as early as the 1960s.⁸ In 1988, Araújo exhibited his wildly famous exhibition “*A Mão Afro-Brasileira/The Afro-Brazilian Hand.*” *A Mão Afro-Brasileira* was exhibited by the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM) for the centenary of the abolition of slavery.⁹ Research for this exhibition began only a year prior when Araújo was in Senegal. Though he conducted the research rather quickly in only six months, Araújo was able to build from his previous exhibition “*África Bahia África*” to think through his curatorial arguments.¹⁰ The exhibition covered the cultural production of Afro-Brazilian artists from the eighteenth century to the contemporary era.¹¹ The exhibition became a book that bore the same name. Araújo explains the book and the exhibition “were in fact the starting point of further research into the meaning of the black contribution to Brazil and their participation in the

⁷ Renato Araújo da Silva, “Africanisms Inside a Museum from Brazil,” *Critical Interventions* 9:2 (2015):123-139, DOI: 10.1080/19301944.2015.1111581124-125.

⁸ Araújo, “Thirty Years of Afro Brazilian Art,” 150.

⁹ Araújo da Silva, , “Africanisms Inside a Museum from Brazil,” 126.

¹⁰ Araújo, “Thirty Years of Afro Brazilian Art,” 150.

¹¹ Araújo da Silva, , “Africanisms Inside a Museum from Brazil,” 126.

construction of its national and cultural identity.”¹² This exhibition ultimately evolved into what we now know as the Museu Afro Brasil.

In 2004, Emanuel Araújo established the Museu Afro Brasil with the support of the Mayor of São Paulo. The Museu Afro Brasil is a public museum located in the heart of Ibirapuera Park in São Paulo, Brazil. At the time of its establishment, 80% of the museum collection came from Emanuel Araújo’s private collection. Since then, the collection has grown. The institution is home to over 8,000 works including artists and materials from Africa and North and South America. The collection is considered one of the largest collections of Afro-American artworks and materials in the Americas.¹³ Though the MAB is considered a contemporary museum, it houses a variety of materials from anthropologic objects such as tools and farm equipment to modern art installations.¹⁴

I present the Museu Afro Brasil as an example to think through particularity because its strategies differ from that of an encyclopedic museum. The MAB uses its materials to provide a deep dive into the lived realities of Afro-diasporic peoples by exhibiting complexity within its collections and stories. Emanuel Araújo explains, “The Afro Brazil Museum reveals this [counter-narrative] with the materiality of the works, not only with pure discourse. It shows a lot of competence and dignity of the African and Afro-descendant population in this country [Brazil]. It is the meeting of positivity, of resistance, of citizen encounter. It is a museum of self-esteem, of pride, which works as a mirror for children, young people, adults and the elderly to

¹² Araújo, “Thirty Years of Afro Brazilian Art,” 151.

¹³ “Introduction,” MuseuAfroBrasil, accessed July 31, 2023, <http://www.museuafrobrasil.org.br/en/the-museum/introduction>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

finally see themselves represented in this Brazil.”¹⁵ The focus of the institution is to affirm the history and life of Afro-diasporic populations. In so doing, the MAB departs from using discovery as the entry point into cross-cultural engagement.

When museums use discovery as the epicenter of their institution, they reinforce colonial erasure. Colonialism requires elimination. Settler colonial technologies silence and destroy the evidence of non-colonial presence while replacing it with new colonial structures. This erasure is an active process enacted by settlers/colonizers. Once the erasure is perceived as complete, settlers/colonizers can exist in their society as if they are unaware of who was there first and how they were disappeared. In the Euro-American museum, museum leaders see themselves as the stewards of the other. As argued in the “Declaration of Universal Museums,” if museums do not bring these other cultures to the masses they will never be known.¹⁶ Discovery necessarily defines a center and periphery. Within the process of discovery, the people at the center are ignorant of the existence of the other people in the periphery while the other people in the periphery are completely conscious of their own existence. The others do not need to find themselves or learn about their lives. Discovery centers the knowledge or lack of knowledge of those who are ignorant rather than those who are conscious. What is new to the discoverer is common to the discovered.

The shift to the Black experience as the center does not erase the presence or impact of non-Black peoples in Brazil. Divesting from discovery-centered museology creates opportunities

¹⁵ Cecília Garcia, “Museu Afro Brasil: Uma Perspectiva Sobre a História e Cultura Afro-Brasileira,” Portal Aprendiz, May 14, 2019, <https://portal.aprendiz.uol.com.br/2019/05/14/museu-afro-brasil-uma-perspectiva-sobre-historia-e-cultura-afro-brasileira/>.

¹⁶ International Council of Museums. "Declaration on the Value and Importance of Universal Museums." (2002) ICOM.

for relational histories to emerge. Though the experiences of Black communities are centered, their experiences are interdependent on the experiences of the other populations in Brazil. Araújo explains, “It is indeed called the Museu Afro Brasil. It isn’t the Museu Afro Brasileiro (Afro-Brazilian Museum), because I created the concept so we could discuss African, *mestizo*, Brazilian issues, including other peoples who are also Brazilian—people of Italian and Japanese descent. Sometimes people call it the Museu Afro Brasileiro, but that changes the concept completely...”¹⁷ The MAB is an institution that is about the Black experience, not just Black people. The focus on the human experience creates space to discuss and think through how complementary and even contradicting histories impact the lived experiences of Afro-Brazilians and the art and culture they create.

Since the MAB caters to an audience that can recognize the African and Afro-diasporic populations in Brazil, the MAB displays varied and even conflicting materials to present nuance and diversity within the Afro-communities related to Brazil. The Museu Afro Brasil does not use objects as symbols of the cultures and communities from where they derive. In the Eurocentric context, museums present materials from the other as symbols of their entire group. As Mikel Bal argues in “The Discourse of the Museum,” the “ethnic artifact” is representative of the whole.¹⁸ Though the object or materials are only an element of the whole, their place as part of the whole transforms them into a synecdoche that can stand in for the whole.¹⁹ Many aspects of the others’ cultures and identities are erased and minimized within the Euro-American museum because of the limited information that is available within these synecdoche. Visitors are unable

¹⁷ “A Conversation Between Adriano Pedrosa and Emanuel Araujo around Afro Brazil.”

¹⁸ Mieke Bal, “The Discourse of the Museum.” In *Thinking About Exhibitions*, (Routledge, 2005), 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

to see beyond the small part on display and in turn can hyperbolize the objects' significance or relevance to the larger community. Additionally, when only a small part is tasked with representing the entire group, the group's dynamism is flattened for the sake of being consumed by the viewer.

The art and stories held within the Museu Afro Brasil are not put on display to prove the presence of Afro-descendants in Brazil nor to help non-Afro-communities find them. Afro-Brazilians already know themselves and their grandmas. Instead, the MAB displays the unique and diverse experiences of Afro-descendants in relation to Portuguese colonization and Afro-diasporic histories. The purpose of the Museu Afro Brasil is to affirm and celebrate what is known within the African diaspora while deepening understanding of human experiences in Brazil. The MAB's mission is to, "promote recognition, appreciation, and preservation of Brazilian, African, and Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage and its presence in national culture."²⁰ Rather than use words like "educate," "discover," or "interpret" like many museums in the Euro-American context, the MAB begins their mission with *reconhecimento*, recognition in English. Recognition, unlike discovery, implies previous encounters and knowledge based on prior experiences. The museum is not only asserting Afro-Brazilians are aware of their own existence but that the white visitor is too. This assertion is significant because it challenges willful ignorance. Since all guests are expected to know about the presence and humanity of the Afro-Brazilians, the MAB can put forth more advanced arguments that discuss systemic oppression and colonialism. Visitors are also able to think more critically about their own positionality in

²⁰ "Missão, Visão e Valores," MuseuAfroBrasil, accessed August 8, 2023, <http://www.museuafrobrasil.org.br/o-museu/miss%C3%A3o-vis%C3%A3o-e-valores>.

relation to what is exhibited and are more likely to take accountability for their complacency in these systems.

The Museu Afro Brasil exists to demonstrate the unique and meticulous experiences of Black people in relation to the development of Brazilian culture and society. The MAB creates a space that is not trying to summarize nor communicate the essence of a group to a new unfamiliar population. The MAB's exhibition space carves out a cultural sphere where Black populations can see the depths of their histories, cultures, and transnational connections. Though the MAB does still have a breadth of materials that is comparable to that of encyclopedic institutions, the ways in which these materials are curated and the arguments they help communicate focus less on universalism and stereotypes and more on plurality and multiplicity. The Museu Afro Brasil relies on particularity as a methodological guide to tell a comprehensive account of Black experiences in Brazil and the African diaspora.

Queeneth Mkabela in "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture," argues particularity is necessary for decolonial praxis. Her article explicitly addresses research ethics in relation to African Indigenous populations, but her arguments are useful for disentangling ethical museum interventions. She explains, "The aim is to be sufficiently detailed and sensitive to actual social contexts and to investigate the methodological bases or orderly character of ordinary social activities. This means that the researcher should understand that what s/he does and how s/he does it is specific to the culture (a situated response), the problem, and dynamics of the particular context."²¹ As museums interested in decolonial futures, museum leadership must also think through what they do and how they do it in relation to the situated

²¹ Queeneth Mkabela, "Using the Afrocentric Method in Researching Indigenous African Culture." *The Qualitative Report* 10 No. 1, (2005): 181. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2005.1864>

response, the problem that they aim to solve, and the dynamics of the context they are working within.

As described in my first chapter, museums do employ initiatives that are geared toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, but these initiatives infrequently challenge the systemic structures that uphold oppression in their institution. As a methodological guide for museology, particularity can help minimize the moment of conflict between the theoretically positive initiative and the empirically harmful oppressive structure. Particularity is useful because the solutions that are implemented are explicitly tailored to the distinctive problems of the institution, situated in a precise time and space, and developed alongside the community they are working with. Particularity removes the need to rely on assumptions or generalizations. It also works against erasure because it holds space for individual details of the circumstances to be named and addressed properly. When museums and any colonial institution operate with their particular colonial history and context in mind; then they are able to engage in more honest and generative problem-solving conversations.

Museums interested in decolonial futures cannot rely on colonial policies, ideologies, or people to lead them toward decoloniality. The Museu Afro Brasil is powerful because the institution shares stories and materials with a direct focus to honor and empower a population disenfranchised by colonialism. The MAB is a museum that everyone can enjoy but it is not a museum about everyone. The museum does not rely on colonial conquest or discovery as its center, and the materials are not a monument to its spoils of war or power. In a conversation with Joyce Farias, Director of Education Research, she explained, “The Museu Afro Brasil is not a

museum about Black people but rather it comes *from* Black people.”²² The researchers, curators, director, and majority of the guests are Afro-descendants. The MAB refutes erasure not just by the collections or the exhibitions but also through the discourse and physical structures within the institution. I spent so much time discussing circular relations in my second chapter because without honoring the collective and imbalanced power relations, colonial violence will inevitably persist. Particularity brings to the forefront the collective and how power is being distributed and mobilized. The Museu Afro Brasil was constructed to serve Afro-Brazilians and is created, curated, and directed by Afro-Brazilians. In so doing, the curatorial strategies are coming from a particular nexus which centers the self-determination and repatriation of agency of Africans and their descendants in Brazil.

Responding to Colonial Legacies

The Museum Afro Brasil, like all other museums, was established within a colonial nation-state invested in the disenfranchisement and erasure of Afro-diasporic and Indigenous peoples. Though Brazil has a large population of racial and cultural diversity, the country is not more harmonious than those of Europe or the United States. The construction of the country of Brazil was invested in the maintenance of white supremacy and land acquisition. Unlike universal museums of the United States and Europe, the Museu Afro Brasil was not established to communicate the value and power of the nation-state itself, but rather the value and power of the nation-state’s most marginalized people. In this section, I will explore some examples of curatorial strategies within the MAB that respond to this particular colonial context. The examples that follow are not universally applicable because of the ways colonialism in Brazil impacts how power is distributed within the Museu Afro Brasil.

²² Emphasis Joyce Farias, (pesquisadora do Museu Afro Brasil) in discussion with author, June 2022.

Brazil maintained the institution of slavery much longer than any other nation in the Americas (though Cuba had just ended slavery two years prior.) The economic and socio-racial norms in Brazil were influenced by this 300-year investment in enslaved labor of both African and American Indigenous peoples. Colonial beliefs of racial hierarchy impacted how Brazil organized its society. Formerly enslaved Africans were not immediately integrated into society after emancipation. Afro-descendant populations still experienced discrimination and race-based violence. Though Brazil never implemented laws that prevented their ability to work or live within society, individual bias and prejudices impacted upward mobility for non-white populations.

The conquest of Indigenous land in the Northwestern and Southwestern hemispheres began at the brink of the 16th century. Before European conquerors arrived at what is now called Brazil, millions of Indigenous people lived and thrived independently. The land housed over 170 different diverse language communities and a variety of different people including peoples of the Tikúna, Tupiniquim, Amapá, Amazona, Tupinambá and many more.²³ The first European colonizers arrived to the New World from Spain in 1492. Portugal was also interested in the expansion and economic gain that was available across these unfamiliar territories. Despite their conflicting interests, in 1494 the Spanish and Portuguese empires made an agreement through the Treaty of Tordesillas to divide the lands of the New World. In early 1500, Portuguese explorer Vasco De Gama arrived in the New World along with a fleet of thirteen Portuguese ships.²⁴

²³ “Unadapted Living: Karara Contact and Death on the Jatapu River,” IWGIA, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/brazil.html#:~:text=Brazil%20is%20the%20country%20in,Rond%C3%B4nia%2C%20Roraima%2C%20and%20Tocantins.>

²⁴ James N. Green, Victoria Langland, and Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, eds. “Conquest and Colonial Rule, 1500–1579.” In *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, 7. Duke University Press, 2019. [https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv120qrdk.5.](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv120qrdk.5)

European colonizers, in this case the Portuguese, were most interested in the extraction of resources and goods to amass power and wealth. Initially, Portuguese invaders were preoccupied with metals and minerals like gold, silver, and iron.²⁵

The Portuguese colonizers were unsuccessful in finding enough precious materials to gain much profit. They swiftly reorganized their economic plan to incorporate agricultural goods, specifically brazilwood. Brazilwood proved to be such a lucrative crop that other European powers like the French and the Dutch journeyed to Portuguese America with the hopes to claim ports of their own and begin their own brazilwood trading centers.²⁶ Ultimately, the Portuguese were able to ward off their competitors and reinforce their control over Portuguese America. After these advances, the Portuguese Crown recognized the importance of their new colony and encouraged further economic development of the land. In addition to brazilwood, Portuguese colonizers began developing *engenhoes* or sugar mills/plantations and coffee plantations.²⁷ Before the Portuguese had invested in the mass enslavement of African peoples, they enslaved Indigenous peoples of the New World to respond to the demand of their booming agricultural economy.

The enslavement of Indigenous people was foundational to the construction of Portuguese America. Indigenous peoples of the New World supported the needs of the Portuguese because of their expertise on the land and native crops, like brazilwood. They were accustomed to harvesting and navigating the land, and as a result, their enslavement was

²⁵Green, Langland, and Schwarcz, "Conquest and Colonial Rule," 7-9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Tarcisio R. Botelho, "Labour Ideologies and Labour Relations in Colonial Portuguese America, 1500-1700." *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011): 277. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44583216>.

beneficial for Portuguese agricultural ventures. Despite their dependency on Indigenous labor, the Portuguese colonizers enforced inhumane and violent techniques of control. As demand increased, so did the harsh working conditions. Enslaved Indigenous populations were victims of violence, accidents in the field, and being overworked. The population of Indigenous people able to work the land soon began to dwindle. Other factors like war, famine, and illness caused many Indigenous people to suffer and drastically impacted the population of available Indigenous laborers.²⁸ These conditions effectively served as genocide against Indigenous peoples in the New World. Death was not the only cause of the diminishment of enslaved Indigenous populations. Other Indigenous peoples were able to outsmart their colonizers and escape their enslavement by venturing away from the coastal areas which were mostly occupied by Portuguese populations. Though the loss of Indigenous life was profound, today Brazil continues to house the largest number of recorded Indigenous communities, with 107 records of Indigenous peoples in the isolated Amazon region alone.²⁹ This large population of Indigenous people is a testament to their refusal of erasure and their dedication to self-preservation.

The Portuguese focused on their continental neighbors in Africa to respond to the diminishing number of available Indigenous workers. The Portuguese Crown had a long history with Indigenous communities of Africa. Starting as early as the 15th century, Portugal had developed ties and trading agreements with ethnic groups across the west coast of Africa. Portugal was first interested in these communities because of their wealth in precious metals like gold. When gold was not offered through trade or was not available, Portuguese officials often

²⁸ Botelho, "Labour Ideologies and Labour Relations," 278.

²⁹ "Unadapted Living: Karara Contact and Death on the Jatapu River."

took prisoners of war instead.³⁰ These prisoners were often members of rival African communities and were perceived as enemies of the trading kingdom. Nonetheless, the trade of these prisoners ultimately supported Portugal's rise as a leading commercial vendor for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Portugal amassed wealth and power as traders of human cargo and this wealth and power allowed the Crown to maintain its economic control in Brazil after enslaving Indigenous people of the New World was no longer viable.

The Portuguese swiftly transitioned from a dependency on enslaved Indigenous American labor to enslaved Indigenous African labor. By the 1530s, the Portuguese crown had already developed a lucrative enterprise selling enslaved Indigenous African peoples to other European powers. The Crown's familiarity with Indigenous communities of Africa and the development of their slave trade industry made the transition to enslaved Indigenous African labor practical and cost-effective in Portuguese America. Due to their trading relations and close proximity, Indigenous Africans often had immunity to European illness. If they came from communities close to the borders of Portugal, they often spoke European languages.³¹ Most useful for the colony was that Indigenous Africans were also familiar with the skills and labor that were necessary to meet the needs of the colony. The population of enslaved Indigenous Africans in Portuguese America grew rapidly. By 1819 across Brazil, the population of enslaved Africans ranged from thirty to almost seventy percent of the total population of any given colonial settlement.³²

³⁰ Botelho, "Labour in Colonial Portuguese America," 287.

³¹ Leslie B. Rout, "Race and Slavery in Brazil." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 1, no. 1 (1976): 73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40255136>.

³² *Ibid*, 82.

Enslaved Indigenous African labor became the backbone of the Brazilian way of life. Portugal was the leading supplier of enslaved humans and in turn, purchasing slave labor was relatively inexpensive in Portuguese America. Enslaved labor was so affordable and accessible that it was common to see white Portuguese people refusing to participate in any manual labor themselves.³³ People who were enslaved were used for even mundane and simple tasks such as begging, in addition to working on plantations.³⁴ Their identities and bodies were transformed from unique human beings to inconsequential objects of production.

On the plantation, enslaved people worked tirelessly and were put in dangerous circumstances which often led to their murder. The death of enslaved African people was usually caused by a combination of extreme working conditions, accidents on the job, physical abuse, and neglect. Similar to the enslaved Indigenous people of the New World, enslaved African populations were also able to escape and develop safe communities called *Quilombos*. Regardless of the cause of the loss of human life, enslaved people were perceived as disposable. Despite these losses, Portuguese colonizers who oversaw these plantations responded promptly by replacing the murdered and missing workers with newly imported enslaved Indigenous African people.³⁵

Through enslavement, Indigenous African peoples experience acute forms of physical and psychological violence. In the opening of a letter written by a French Cotton buyer, L. F. de Tollenare, enslaved Africans in Portuguese America were described as nothing more than just

³³ Rout, "Race and Slavery in Brazil," 86.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 79.

“cattle.”³⁶ His letter continues and discusses how enslaved Africans were treated and perceived. He states “... the sugar-mill owner, armed with a whip and visiting the dependencies of his estate, is a king who has only animals about him: his blacks; his squatters or *moradores*, slaves whom he mistreats...”³⁷ Enslaved Africans were not considered people. They were treated and understood to be no better and no smarter than animals that work the land. In another account from British Consul H. Augustus Cowper, he explains that the institution of slavery was so vile and violent that its sole purpose was to diminish the things that help people maintain their humanity.³⁸ The account is a long description of the maltreatment of enslaved people and the degree of torture enslaved Africans experienced. The account ends by stating, “In a word, my Lord, all the worst features of slavery exist in the province; the endeavor of the master is to suppress alike the intellect, the passion, and the sense of these poor creatures, and the laws aid them in transforming the African man into the American beast”.³⁹

These accounts were written in support of improving the conditions of enslaved Africans, but they also provide insight into how enslaved peoples were perceived by society and even outsiders. To the slave masters and officials in Brazil, enslaved Africans were disposable tools to use to gain profit and exercise power and control. To the well-meaning foreigner, the enslaved African was a victim to the violence that had transmuted them, against their will, into forms of animalia and beasts. Both of these conceptions oversimplified the experiences of African peoples

³⁶ Robert E. Conrad, *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 63.

³⁷ Ibid. 65.

³⁸ Ibid, 71-76.

³⁹ Ibid. 76.

that were enslaved. Empirically, enslaved Africans were people that had the capacity for intellect and care.

The discourse surrounding slavery within the Museu Afro Brasil represents Africans and their descendants with nuance and plurality. Ana Lucia Lopes, Curatorial Planning Coordinator explains, “Slavery is a theme present in our collection, presenting it from the discussion about technologies and work. It is not a positive view of slavery, because it has no way of being [positive], but it is a more complex view that looks at the subject who was enslaved as a subject who actually built Brazil from his workforce.”⁴⁰ Slavery does not become an overpowering narrative within the museum, instead, it coexists with other socio-cultural realities of Africans and their descendants. Within these galleries’ spaces, slavery is contextualized alongside other moments of movement and culture-making in Afro-descendants’ lives. The MAB does not shy away from discussing slavery and its negative impact. The MAB highlights the tragedy and violence that is a direct product of slavery while not minimalizing the existence of Africans and their descendants to just being slaves.

One of the thematic nuclei within MAB is “Trabalho e Escravidão/Labor and Slavery.” The gallery space of “Design and Technology” presents a history that unveils the ways in which those who were enslaved were innovative. In the wall text of the exhibition on “Design and Technology of the time of Slavery,” Director Emanuel Araújo states “... the Museu Afro Brasil rewrites the History of Technology in Brazil, as it redeems the nation built by the hands of Africans, thus bringing a positive image to Black people, fundamental for us to proudly assume their presence in our identity.” In this wall text, the director and curator Emanuel Araújo posits

⁴⁰ “Museu Afro Brasil: Uma Perspectiva Sobre a História e Cultura Afro-Brasileira.”

that the infrastructures that makeup Brazil were fabricated by African minds and hands. Within the gallery the visitor is able to see tangible proof of the innovation and cleverness of enslaved Africans. Through colonial erasure Africans and their descendants are seen as objects that execute labor. In this gallery space, Araújo is arguing that these people are the producers both physically and intellectually of these technologies and scientific advancements. In turn, those who are enslaved are humanized as foundational contributors to the development of Brazilian agriculture and society.

In addition to the intellectual contribution, the MAB works to make visible how emotions and humanhood persisted despite enslavement. On the second floor, is an enclosed gallery space with three entranceways. Within this gallery, the MAB displays remnants of a slave ship, instruments of torture, and importantly the perspectives and faces of African peoples. This gallery is one of the few spaces where the MAB focuses on the pain and sorrow of enslaved people. These emotions are necessary to understand the lived realities of enslaved people and their descendants. Rather than portray enslaved people as beasts, tools of labor, or even historical figures, this gallery forces the viewer to contend with some of the most violent aspects of slavery and then look the victims in the eyes.

The materials in this gallery space immerse the visitor into a historical moment and into a moment where emotions are palpable. The visitor can almost feel the weight of the metal objects of torture since they loom above your head and are anchored solidly at your feet. The slave ship sits at the center of the room and consumes most of the gallery. The visitor has no choice but to imagine how they would fit in such a vessel. A picture of the boat in situ is displayed prominently on the wall. In the image, there is only the ship, the water, and one single phenotypically Black person. This image appears to be taken contemporarily since it is in color

and high resolution and the viewer cannot help but wonder when and where this photograph was taken and why that person was there alone. Directly beneath this photograph are four large-scale portraits of presumably enslaved African men, with names and signatures. The juxtaposition of the slave ship and the portraits of Black men emphasizes that the transportation of people was a real human experience. Though these men may not have been on this specific ship, the pairing of the two brings to the forefront that people with names and faces were forced into human trafficking. The display of instruments of torture and harsh working conditions tell only a part of the story of enslaved peoples because enslaved peoples found ways to resist and maintain their identities.

The story of Afro-descendants in Brazil does not start at slavery within the MAB. The history of Afro-descendants begins on the continent of Africa. Immediately as you exit the ramp on the second floor, the visitor sees the Museu Afro Brasil's permanent collections. The first wall that receives the visitor has wall text and a grid of colonial images that show different people in various economic and socio-racial statuses. This wall gives the viewer context of what is to be expected in the permanent collection. Directly behind this wall, the visitor gets their first glimpse of African culture and peoples. If the visitor continues straight, they are greeted with examples of Kente clothes and metallurgy. If the visitor chooses to walk to the right they are greeted with a quilted textile, a polychrome wood sculpture of two men riding white horses, and a vivid larger-than-life photograph of Nana Kwasi Asampong II, Regent of Apesorkubi, and Okyeame Mfodwo. Venturing deeper into this area, the visitor sees arts and materials ranging from sculptures to masks, from clothing to photographs. All of these materials come from different ethnic groups within Africa including the Yoruba, Tchokwe, and more. Throughout the

exhibition spaces in the MAB, the visitor can get acquainted with African peoples before European colonization.

When Portuguese colonizers came to the New World, they came as individual explorers interested in building wealth and nobility. Portuguese men were preoccupied with power and this preoccupation extended into sexual relationships as well.⁴¹ Many of these interactions were not consensual. Enslaved African and Indigenous women were often victims of sexual violence. Portuguese slave owners benefitted from forced sexual relations and had little to any consequences for their actions. White Portuguese colonizers were able to exercise their power and dominance through rape.⁴² Furthermore, rape was a mechanism that helped Portuguese slave owners to increase their working population for free.⁴³ In so doing, a large population of mixed-race peoples developed as a product of slavery.

Generally, *mestiçagem* (ethno-racial mixing) was inevitable because of the density of racial diversity within the colony and the nation of Brazil. White Europeans were the smallest racial demographic in all of Brazil. When Europeans arrived at the New World, the Indigenous population was numbered in the millions. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the Portuguese imported almost four million enslaved Africans.⁴⁴ By the mid-19th century, Africans and their descendants made up over fifty percent of the total population of Brazil.⁴⁵ As a result, European,

⁴¹ Lamonte Aidoo, "The Racial and Sexual Paradoxes of Brazilian Slavery and National Identity." In *Slavery Unseen: Sex, Power, and Violence in Brazilian History*, (Duke University Press, 2018), 25–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11314xj.5>.

⁴² *Ibid*, 27.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 26-28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

Indigenous Americans, and Indigenous Africans were living in proximity which accelerated racial mixing.

European approval was a preoccupation of Brazilian elites. Brazil obtained its independence in 1822. During the early 19th century, European powers like England and France were pushing for the end of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. By this time many nations had agreed to outlaw the importation of enslaved Africans or had ceased their connection to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade completely. As an independent nation, Brazil desired to be recognized by European powers.⁴⁶ Brazil signed the British-Brazilian Treaty of 1826 agreeing to end the trafficking of enslaved Indigenous African by 1830.⁴⁷ This treaty granted Brazil the recognition it was searching for. However, Brazil as a recognized independent nation did not comply.⁴⁸ Brazil continued to illegally import enslaved Africans well into the mid-19th century.⁴⁹ Even after they ceased to import enslaved Africans, Brazil continued to rely on the labor of captive humans until 1888.

In the years leading up to the emancipation of enslaved people in Brazil, Brazilian officials began encouraging the immigration of European laborers.⁵⁰ As more European laborers arrived the Brazilian government was able to benefit twofold. Financially they were able to minimize the financial burden they would incur after the end of free labor. Socially, Brazilian

⁴⁶ Leslie Bethell, "The Decline and Fall of Slavery in Brazil (1850–88)." In *Brazil: Essays on History and Politics*, (University of London Press, 2018), 114. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv51309x.8>.

⁴⁷ Jane Elizabeth Adams, "The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade," *The Journal of Negro History* 10, No. 4, (October 1925), 614.

⁴⁸ Bethell, "The Decline and Fall of Slavery in Brazil," 113-117.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

officials hoped to simultaneously whiten the population of their country through European immigration.⁵¹ In many cases, the white slave masters maintained control of their working force. Since slave labor was no longer available, the white former slave masters were more likely to hire new European immigrants to work for pay rather than compensate their former slaves.⁵² Africans and their descendants were still primarily seen in society as lesser or servile and upward mobility was often challenging.

Racial mixing eventually became a blight on Brazilian socio-racial structures. Under colonial racial hierarchy, Africans and their descendants were a subhuman class. Their place in society mandated that they were to be of service to Europeans and exist as laborers. Indigenous peoples were also perceived as second-class citizens, though legally in both Spanish and Portuguese Americas their souls were salvageable through converting to Christianity. Empirically, however, Indigenous peoples in most cases were not treated any better than their African counterparts. The most respectable population in the colony was the white Europeans. They were the leaders of the colony and the only real valuable humans in society. In the context of slavery, *mestiçagem* was useful because it increased workers at little to no cost. Breeding children mixed with African heritage produced more slaves. Outside of the institution of slavery, Brazil was experiencing a national crisis. Over time Brazil was becoming more and more mixed, which in turn made the country less and less white. Brazilian elites were still very much invested

⁵¹ Christian Kravagna and Jennifer Taylor. "Transcultural Beginnings: Decolonisation, Transculturalism, and the Overcoming of Race." In *Transmodern: An Art History of Contact, 1920-60*, (Manchester University Press, 2022), 92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv333krzc.8>.

⁵² Carlos Hasenbalg and Suellen Huntington. "Brazilian Racial Democracy: Reality or Myth?" *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 10, No. 1 (1982): 130. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23261860>.

in colonial white supremacy and wanted their country to maintain the worth and appearance of a white nation. Yet, the growing population of mixed people served as a barrier.

Gilberto Freyre was a Brazilian scholar that developed an ideology that helped Brazil cope with its diverse population. Freyre was born in Recife, Pernambuco in Brazil. He traveled to the United States to earn his bachelor's degree at Baylor University and his master's degree at Columbia University.⁵³ Freyre was one of the first scholars to reframe racial mixing in a positive light with a particular focus on Brazil.⁵⁴ Within his book, *Casa Grande e Senzala* he argues against previous notions of mestiçagem. Before, mestiçagem was a process that was expected to eventually whiten or dilute the general population; however, high concentrations of non-white people made that virtually impossible. Freyre proposed that the advancement of the human race depends on culture rather than race.⁵⁵ He argued that African peoples had rich cultural history and their presence contributed to the positive development of Brazil.

Freyre's ideology benefitted the white ruling class but continued to maintain social hierarchies. His perspective gave white Brazilians a new sense of cultural and national identity. The people that had so long been their mark of shame were transformed into a source of pride. Nevertheless, his theories were still informed by Eurocentricity. Freyre did not see all African people as valuable. He explained that Brazilians had sought out slaves for their own sexual desires and skillful jobs.⁵⁶ Unlike slaves that were brutish and bestial in other colonies, the

⁵³ Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke, "A Two-Headed Thinker: Rüdiger Bilden, Gilberto Freyre, and the Reinvention of Brazilian Identity." In *Indigenous Visions: Rediscovering the World of Franz Boas*, edited by Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah Lorado Wilner, (Yale University Press, 2018): 330. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22h6qn7.17>.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 331-336.

⁵⁵ Anadelia A. Romo, "Rethinking Race and Culture in Brazil's First Afro-Brazilian Congress of 1934," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4491775>.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 42

enslaved Africans within Brazil came from civilized Muslim African communities. In turn, these Brazilian slaves were attractive, civilized, and intelligent and these are the traits that the Brazilian people carry within themselves as a product of *mestiçagem*.⁵⁷

The MAB has a nucleus entitled “África: Diversidade e Permanência/Africa: Diversity and Durability.” Within this nucleus, the Museu Afro Brasil demonstrates that empirically, most enslaved peoples were not coming from the communities Freyre was describing. The MAB uses its collection to visually map out how West African ethnic groups’ cultures and identities were preserved and ultimately how they are still salient today. The MAB includes objects that are religious and ceremonial. The exhibition spaces also have examples of textiles and clothing. Printed along the walls are examples of proverbs and stories that relate to the continent of Africa. These sorts of materials are evidence of the intensity of life that was/is present on the continent of Africa. These examples help illustrate a visual and historic connection between African peoples and Afro-Brazilians.

As the visitor moves through the galleries, textiles that were seen as “African” are reencountered in Afro-Brazilian contexts. African deities traveled across the Atlantic into the religious practices of Brazilian citizens. The transportation of enslaved Africans was a direct product of colonialism. However, the maintenance of African cultural practices and visual forms was a form of resistance against colonialism. The MAB shows that continuation of African cultures is an example of an Afro-diasporic life that persisted independently of or in opposition to the colonial violence they were experiencing. The Museu Afro Brasil once again challenges

⁵⁷ Romo, “Rethinking Race and Culture in Brazil’s First Afro-Brazilian Congress of 1934,” 42.

the desire to whiten and homogenize Brazil by exposing the many ways Africa and African-ness are continuous in Brazil.

The Museu Afro Brasil positions Afro-populations and their ancestors as a source of knowledge and a foundational component to what is “Brazilian-ness.” Through the ideological process of *mestiçagem*, African identities and cultures were absorbed and conceptually diluted. Brazilian socio-racial politics co-opted and erased the contributions of Africans and their descendants. The MAB focuses on the ways Africa lives in Brazil and reveals powerful ways that Africans and their descendants have built Brazilian society and culture. In direct opposition to the claims of Freyre, the MAB asserts that Indigenous cultures of the Ivory Coast, North, and Southwest Africa are valuable and inseparable parts of Brazilian culture and history. The nucleus “*As Religiões Afro-Brasileiras/The Afro-Brazilian Religions*” provides the most explicit example of this opposition. Through this nucleus, the visitor is able to see how Brazilian religions fused African and European faith together and developed a religious practice that is heavily influenced by both and is simultaneously unlike either.

As part of “The Afro-Brazilian Religions” nucleus, the MAB presents a history of parades and processions within Brazil. The gallery that exhibits this history is adorned with headpieces that resemble the styles of Egungun masks. Other masks that resemble animals like bulls or antelope are present and derive from West African ceremonial practice. Chairs that call on the functions and styles of the unique thrones of Indigenous West African chiefs are also exhibited as common visual components of these processions. The processions themselves are a product of European Catholic ceremonial practice. The gallery incorporates European stylized crowns and depictions of horses. The small bits and parts of this ceremonial practice are easily identifiable with African and European religious practice, though neither Europe nor Africa has a

processional practice that resembles what is practiced in Brazil. The combination of the two cultural and religious elements morphs into a regional practice that is all its own. The Museu Afro Brasil masterfully captures the uniqueness that is derived through syncretization, preservation, and assimilation. This gallery illustrates that Brazilian society cannot exist without the contribution and practices of the African diaspora. If one is to attribute European culture to the development of Brazil, then one must also recognize the salience of African cultures in Brazilian society.

Beginning in the 19th and continuing into the present, *mestiçagem* is propagandized as a practice of inclusion and harmony rather than one of erasure and oppression. Intellectual thinkers, like Freyre, minimized the violence of slavery in Brazil. Their goal was to present as an “ethnic democracy” that shared equal rights to all Brazilians.⁵⁸ What made up a Brazilian was not one specific race but instead a mixture of all races. Black and Indigenous cultures were incorporated into the national image. From this incorporation, their cultures were transmuted into nationalistic cultural practices of Brazil. In many cases, these cultural practices were so far removed from their source communities that they became representative of white Brazilian-ness rather than their cultural origins. Black and Indigenous peoples were invisibilized for the sake of presenting a unified national front. Through this invisibilization, their oppression was silenced and hidden. Brazil celebrated African arts and cultures while simultaneously discouraging Afro-Brazilians' desires to explore and celebrate their African-influenced cultural practices.

The Museu Afro Brasil responds to this invisibilization and asserts that Africans and their descendants contributed to Brazilian society. The Museu Afro Brasil's exhibitions present

⁵⁸ Kravagna and Taylor. “Transcultural Beginnings,” 93.

examples of how and when Afro-Brazilians were invisibilized in relation to the arts and culture of Brazil. The nucleus “*Artes Plásticas: a Mão Afro Brasileira*/Fine Arts: The Afro-Brazilian Hand,” exhibits different periods of art in Brazil from Baroque to Modern and Contemporary Art. The subject matter and the styles of these artworks are consistent with the forms of European masters. The paintings displayed in the Baroque section were commonly commissioned by churches and government officials. These paintings depicted images of a fair-skinned, straight-haired Jesus Christ. In the Rococo sections, the carvings and architectural details call on French and Portuguese design. This exhibit displays art that the uncritical visitor would assume was made by European hands, but as the nucleus name explicitly asserts, these are fine arts by the hand of Afro-Brazilians. The visual and stylistic attributes of these objects can easily be presented as testaments to the greatness of European design, and to an extent are a direct product of European art forms. Importantly, these artists are not Europeans.

The *Artes Plásticas: a Mão Afro Brasileira* challenges essentialized thinking that distinct binaries exist between Afro-diasporic and European cultures and histories. In an interview Emanuel Araujo expresses “The arts in eighteenth-century Brazil were completely Black because Black people created them, although the standard is European, Portuguese.”⁵⁹ The Museu Afro Brasil makes two main arguments when they present these objects. The first is that despite centuries of racist ideologies that saw Afro-artists as incompetent and uninspired, Africans and their descendants are not only capable of producing “fine art,” but also have been doing so for centuries. The second argument is that the arts that have been historically considered to be innately European or undeniably derived from whiteness, in Brazil at least, commonly were the product of Africans and Afro-Brazilians. In a short essay, “O Museu Afro Brasil,” Araujo goes

⁵⁹ “A Conversation Between Adriano Pedrosa and Emanuel Araujo around Afro Brazil.”

on to explain, “As a museum of the diaspora, the Afro Brazil Museum, therefore, records not only what is African among us, but what was here apprehended, chalded, and transformed by the hands and soul of the black, still safeguarding the legacy of our artists – and there were many, anonymous and recognized, those who in this process of ethnic miscegenation and cultural miscegenation contributed to the originality of our Brazilianness”⁶⁰ The Museu Afro Brasil challenges what is perceived to be European because it uncovers the ways Afro-descendants were used as artists and artisans but denied authorship.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the perspectives of museum leadership at the Museu Afro Brasil. The leaders of the Museu Afro Brasil center the experiences and histories of Afro-diasporic peoples. The MAB departs from the colonial function of museums, which was to serve and represent the nation-state/colony, and instead, consciously serves people and their emotional and social well-being. The strategies and initiatives employed by the Museu Afro Brasil are informed by AIKS principle of particularity. Particularity does not automatically signal a decolonized institution but can be a stepping stone toward decolonial futures. I argue that once museums actively respond to their individual contexts, then museums can develop strategies that respond to the particularity of their communities and decolonial goals. The second section of this chapter discussed examples of curatorial strategies that responded to the direct socio-cultural context that impacts the MAB and its community. Museums must first divest from their own colonial legacy and center their communities. Through the nurturing of these relationships, new approaches can collaboratively be created and lead to communal participation in decolonial processes. This chapter works to encourage museum leadership to reframe how they think about decolonial

⁶⁰ Emanuel Araújo, “O Museu Afro Brasil,” *Comunicação & Educação*, Vol. 15 No. 1, (2010), 125-129. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9125.v15i1p125-129>

approaches and recognize that the path forward lives within the unique circumstances of the community.

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On-Going Thoughts: Defining Decolonization & Working Through New Systems

I began this dissertation with a completely different project in mind. I have faced many obstacles and hurdles as I pursued this research. Also, I have experienced many moments of support and joy. I was not rigid in my research focus; instead, I allowed my communities and my research questions to guide me. I do not aim to make finalized assertions or takeaways in this last section. I would rather use this time to reflect on the research and possible questions or limits that may be apparent now that we have reached the end.

Before I had even taken my exams, I contacted an Art History professor for guidance with my dissertation project. We met once and within the first 10 minutes of this meeting, the professor asked me, “How do you plan to not make your dissertation too celebratory of this museum in Brazil?” Before that point, I had never considered my research a celebration or a condemnation of museums. I was curious to understand what was working and what was not and why. I did not have a good response to their question; and though we did chat for a long time that day, we never met again. I did not approach this project with the goal to be overly celebratory, but I do wish to celebrate the innovation and care that I witnessed at the Museu Afro Brasil (MAB). The point of this dissertation is not to highlight where the Museu Afro Brasil has failed at decolonization. I spent the first two chapters of my dissertation unpacking in detail how museums uphold colonialism in their organizations. The Museu Afro Brasil is not exempt from many of these issues. While the MAB is not perfect, the Museu Afro Brasil does help us think through how changes within our institutions can be thoughtful and deliberately respond to colonial violence.

I have grappled with the discomfort of not providing succinct takeaways that can help the eager museum professional interested in decolonizing the museum. A thematic throughline of this project is to question our own individual desires to be told how to fix something and to avoid dealing with our own failures and possible inadequacies regarding problem-solving. The point is not to want to be righteous or even right. Perfection should not be the goal. I am calling for vulnerability to acknowledge that we as individual people cannot know how to decolonize. Decolonization is a collective action. Unlike colonization which can be enacted to serve the individual, decolonization serves the collective. If we attempt to decolonize without considering the collective, all peoples, then I feel decolonization will always elude us. As a PhD, we often work toward a sense of expertise, but as I dove deeper into decolonial thought, I realized that being an expert on decolonization is an impossibility. The more time I spent thinking through this project, the more I wanted to spend time with people and not in archives or academic journals. I realized the answer cannot be found solely based on my own pontification. I need, we need, to talk to each other. For this reason, I did not include a summary on “how to decolonize the museum” because I do not wish to encourage a one-size fits all, non-collectivized movement toward decolonization. My research presents possible frameworks that we can think through. I hope to encourage reflection on what are useful considerations when trying to move towards decolonial futures rather than precise action items. My hope is that we learn to think with the collective in mind, and problem-solve as a community.

How I Am Thinking About Decolonization

Decolonization, like colonization, is a process that requires time. Decolonization is not a thing that we can own or command at will. As I explain in my second chapter, so much of our understanding of knowledge is informed by European Enlightenment ideologies. The inclination to have a command over knowledge is an extension of colonial conquest. Seeking absolute

control, even over information, is a colonial practice. We cannot command decolonization. When we make declarative statements such as “we are decolonizing the museum,” we run the risk of trying to define decolonization based on our own perceptions and biases. Decolonization is a process that we can participate in and that we can be guided by. We cannot claim, in absolute, that we “did” decolonization because it is on-going and does not have an end that we can currently see.

I suggest that decolonial projects are necessarily imperfect, messy, and irresolvable, at least within our present time. We, in the present, sit at a temporal borderland between the colonial and decolonial. The colonial is the perceived past that has informed the current state of the world. The decolonial is the perceived future that informs our current actions. Contemporarily, both colonial and decolonial realities can be experienced and recognized, but neither can escape the other. In the same world, we are experiencing Palestinian genocide, we are also witnessing the Rappahannock Tribe get 465 acres of sacred land back from the US government.¹ These moments are happening simultaneously in the same physical realm. At this border, to claim decolonization takes into account only your individual circumstance. We cannot be decolonized; we cannot claim decolonization as a thing we do unless it impacts the whole of humanity. Accounting for the whole of humanity is impossible for any given individual or even small group. For this reason, our individual actions can work alongside and within decolonial processes, but they themselves cannot be decolonizing.

Prioritizing the process of decolonization helps avoid pedantic definitions and strict expectations that require reinterpretations every few years. Additionally, seeing decolonization

¹ Rappahannock Indian Tribe, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.rappahannocktribe.org/>.

as a thing we do, rather than a process we participate in, constructs a binary of good and bad. When we are unable to “do” decolonization then we are doomed to feel as if we are then “doing” colonization. At this colonial/decolonial temporal border, no one can escape either. At times we will be unable to not participate in colonial processes, but also settlers will experience moments when they cannot avoid decolonial processes either. Understanding our place at this border can relieve the guilt and pressure to be perfect in the name of decolonization. Decolonization is necessarily messy because we are still contending with colonization and very few transitions happen without some problems. Honoring the fluidity and messiness of decolonization grants a chance to try and make mistakes while not being over-critical or concerned with our actions being enough.

I understand decolonial processes as collaborative endeavors that are working toward similar goals of self-determination and anti-coloniality shared between ancestors, present communities, and unborn generations. As collaborators, our actions impact all stakeholders, past, present, and future, and we are dependent on all collaborators, past, present, and future. I plan to develop these thoughts further as I continue my academic career. I decided to include these thoughts here as they do inform why I have chosen to write a dissertation thinking through decolonial processes and cultural institutions. Museums have been an institution that has harmed ancestors and people in the contemporary era. I am writing to participate in the process to subvert and challenge the colonial legacy in these spaces. I write from African Indigenous Knowledge Systems because I am relying on the legacy of anti-colonial organizing and knowledge pathways of my ancestors to build on their foundation and continue decolonial processes for future generations.

Why I Did Not Discuss Land

I described a myriad of issues regarding decolonizing the museum. At every moment that feels like a win, we can discover ways that these actions are just not enough to decolonize an institution like a museum. The purpose of these examples is not to assert that decolonizing museums is impossible. If that were the case, then I would have written a completely different dissertation. Instead, I want to call for transparency regarding what we are up against as people invested in decolonizing colonial institutions. The tensions and challenges that exist will arise at every corner. The hundreds of years of colonial conditioning will impact all aspects of how we think and interact with these institutions and each other.

The fear of impossibility or eternal colonial damnation in and of itself is colonial. When we call back to the lessons from our schools and universities, they are still presented through colonialism. Our world at any given moment is engulfed in colonial violence, and it extends across horizons. The violence of erasure and conquest has left us with few memories from before colonialism. We cannot see beyond colonialism because the lenses through which we peer into the future are tainted with colonialism. Colonialism purposefully produces a fog that is difficult to peer beyond to convince the colonized that our only options are what we see in this reality. Decolonization requires us to use our imagination to build futures beyond our reality, even when it feels irrational or like just a dream.

Colonialism rejects the notion of the irrational. The irrational in this sense would include worldviews and experiences that are contrary to what the colonial imaginary deems as real. What is real within a colonial episteme is only what we can see and experience firsthand. Through colonial logic what is rational is only what can be proven through tangible evidence. Feelings and memories are ephemeral and immaterial and in turn are deemed as unreliable and irrational.

These sorts of human knowledge are disregarded because they are too personal and inconsistent. Rationality, as constructed by colonialism, influences us to strive toward definite and universalized truths.

Colonial universalized truths oversimplify the complexities of the world and are easy to internalize and reproduce. These truths are plentiful, but I will focus on three in particular. Firstly, power and worth are established through control. Historically, European elites use their ability to own property and people as markers of their influence. For every new square meter they acquired, they amassed a new jurisdiction under their authority. For every new servant, they gained a new person to answer to their beck and call. Worth was defined by what they could own and sell. Power was informed by whom and what must bend to their whim. These practices persisted throughout the colonial era and maintain a truth today.

The second colonial universalized truth is time only advances forward which produces the modern and defines the primitive. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, European philosophers became preoccupied with the notion of progress. They wanted to advance humanity. They believed that the traditions of the past were outdated and needed to be improved. These philosophers dedicated their lives to developing all aspects of human life from race to technology, to art and literature. What was important was that humanity continued to move forward away from the obsolete structures of the past. This universalized truth oversimplifies the ways people and society can be complex and it disregards the many ways tradition and contemporary advancement coexist. This truth assigns value to different ways of life and being. Those who were invested in the progress and rapid changes of society are deemed to be capable and modern. Those who continued to be closely aligned to what is understood as the past are seen as incompetent and primitive.

The third colonial universalized truth is our individual selves and those like us are the norm. Colonizers used difference as a major marker to define who were worthy beings and who were subhuman. These delineations were important as they facilitated who governed society and who became the servants to those who govern. White European, able-bodied, male elites were the center of society and those who deviated from this specific identity were often treated as lesser, albeit at varying intensities. These white European elites saw their individual identity as the only acceptable identity and constructed societal regulations based on this individualized approach. Though we may not all be the white European, able-bodied, male elites of the colonial era, the methodology of how to define what was normal or acceptable is informed by their ideological framing. In the contemporary era, the explicit hierarchies of the colonial era have become more amorphous, but the center from which we define normalcy begins with ourselves as individuals.

The consequence of these sorts of colonial universalized truths are that we continue to reinforce coloniality while simultaneously denying ourselves the ability to think beyond current structures. Our belief in the colonial rationale has established a discomfort with a lack of control and that which cannot be known. Ideologies of modernity caused us to be dependent on linear forms of thinking and working. Individualized ways of thinking force us to prioritize ourselves and our immediate relationships as the most important centers of our world. When these components of our rationale are challenged, we can feel dysregulated. This sensation of dysregulation signals to our bodies that something is wrong and thus we actively work away from it and return to what is “rational” or comfortable.

The colonial system was constructed to reproduce itself. The discomfort experienced when pushed against the limits of colonial rationale is a mechanism to keep the people within the

system. Working within colonial logics reproduces the anxieties and barriers of colonialism. These barriers allow people to settle within a world that makes sense and feels rational. What is considered rational within colonial systems is defined by colonial ontologies and epistemologies. The expectations of how one should interact with the society around them are clear and known. Referencing Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, colonialism functions as an institution that subjects people to a machinery of power that explores them, breaks them down, and rearranges them to fit the purpose of the institution.² Through "subtle coercion" or discipline, bodies are made to be docile and "docile" bodies are trained to be obedient and efficient.³ At every moment of deviance, there are explicit consequences that reinscribe colonial expectations.

Dysregulation feels uncomfortable because it challenges an institution that wishes to continue. In "Decolonization is not a metaphor," Tuck and Yang name this process of dysregulation as unsettling.⁴ I define unsettling as a disturbed uneasy sensation and a process of disinvesting from settler colonialism.⁵ Unsettling is paramount to participating in decolonial processes as it presents opportunities to look beyond colonial barriers and toward decolonial futures. Tuck and Yang explain decolonization will be chaotic and particular to the time, place, and community. Part of what makes decolonization so chaotic is that it requires us to destroy that of which we have always known. Frantz Fanon argues in *Wretched of the Earth*, that overthrowing the reigning power structure is not enough. He explains one must destroy

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. A. Sheridan, (Vintage Books, New York, 1977) 138.

³ Ibid, 170.

⁴ Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.

⁵ Ibid.

everything that colonization has touched to truly decolonize and rid ourselves of colonialism. This destruction should not be minimized as excessive violence. This destruction is a necessary removal of colonial boundaries we have been conditioned to accept. These boundaries impact all aspects of our reality. These boundaries exist at varying levels personally, interpersonally, and structurally. How we think, love, feel, and act are all informed by colonial limits. These colonial limits make seeing beyond our current state difficult and for some impossible. When we unsettle and destroy these boundaries, our visions of possibilities and new futures can emerge.

Unsettling should not be confused with undoing. The prefix “de” in decolonization should not signify a reversal. Colonialism is a multi-generational and multi-layered process that has existed for over five hundred years. Fanon argues that returning to pre-colonial times is impossible as they have been perverted and lost as a product of colonialism. Years of colonialism have informed our existence as beings on Earth and cannot be undone or reversed. Colonialism is a wound that all beings must heal. The prefix “de” in decolonization should be about removal. While one may prefer to go back to a time before we were injured. Though the contemporary era is temporally different from the pre-colonial era, we cannot just reverse or return to a pre-colonial time. We now know what it feels like to be colonized. The hurt and violence we have experienced cannot be erased. We can remove the current wound, but it may still leave a scar. Decolonization requires that we acknowledge these scars and then remove the circumstances and beliefs that lead to their creation. We cannot undo what has happened, but we can heal.

For these reasons, decolonization is not equivalent to social justice. Social justice initiatives serve as an immediate response to current colonial conditions. Conceptions of justice are informed by nation-state judicial systems. Justice is a legal term with the purpose to protect

rights and punish wrongs using fairness or impartiality.⁶ Our language and understanding of what justice is and who deserves justice are derived from nation-state governmental regulations. Justice is not about healing but rather consequences and rewards. While oppression can be challenged under the guise of justice, oppression cannot be eradicated within these nation-state structures since they necessitate a ruling and a servile class. Social justice initiatives may undermine the ruling class, but they continue to function within the colonial system. Social justice initiatives are not necessarily decolonial but decolonial processes always serve the needs of the oppressed. Social justice initiatives are important and do help people, but they are not designed to look beyond colonialism. These limits to social justice are why Tuck and Yang rigidly assert that decolonization requires the literal return of Indigenous land and life. Repatriation of land allows Indigenous communities agency over their lives in a way that is impossible through current colonial structures. Social justice initiatives serve as only a band-aid to larger systemic issues that the authors argue can only be addressed when Indigenous people get their land back.

Land is an important component to colonial technologies, but it cannot be the only constitutive factor for decolonization as there are colonized people with no land. My research is invested in the liberation and care of global Indigenous communities and Afro-diasporic peoples. Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor" centers the perspectives and historical context of Indigenous communities native to the lands that are occupied by the nation-states of the United States and Canada. The arguments put forth by Tuck and Yang are a useful starting point to approaching decolonial processes. Their article is foundational to this dissertation and

⁶ "Justice Definition & Meaning - Black's Law Dictionary," The Law Dictionary, October 19, 2012, <https://thelawdictionary.org/justice/>

how I understand decolonial processes. Within this project, I must depart from their definition of decolonization slightly. My work necessitates that I think about decolonization through relational approaches. For this reason, I turn to Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino's article "Slavery is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.'" The emphasis on land as the core of decolonization establishes a false Indigenous-settler binary.⁷ Tuck and Yang's subjectivity as settler/native writing from the context of North America with superficial incorporation of Black theorists alienates Black peoples from decolonial theory and processes.⁸ Additionally, Tuck and Yang's arguments do not hold up as neatly within the contexts of Latin American and Caribbean colonization where processes of *mestizaje/mestiçagem* and creolization make delineations between Black, Native, and white more nebulous.

Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino argue, "Tuck and Yang's analysis and citational practices demonstrate that while land rescues Indigenous peoples from the condition of interminable metaphoricity (the driving thesis of their essay), Black people are in the singular position of beginning and ending their 'track towards Liberation' as empty signifiers. Land is the signifier that secures the impossibility of Indigenous fungibility."⁹ Enslaved Black people and their descendants are held hostage in a cycle of political indecipherability.¹⁰ As slaves we are essential to the commodification of land but as non-Natives, we are inconsequential to its

⁷ "Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino, "Slavery is a Metaphor: a Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,'" *Antipode* 52, No. 3 (2020): 765; 776.

⁸ *Ibid*, 765.

⁹ *Ibid*, 772.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 776.

repatriation.¹¹ Under the structures of colonialism, Black people are non-human laborers and in this construction of decolonization, Black people are pseudo-settlers that do not belong. The dehumanization and dispossession that come from the violence of slavery are both direct consequences of colonialism.¹²

Colonial powers relinquishing their ownership of land is necessary for decolonial futures, and the decolonial process must make space for all colonized beings. The purpose of repatriation cannot only be for the desire to return to old Indigenous ways. Referencing Fanon once again, colonialism has perverted all aspects of our lives from how we relate to land and our own identities.¹³ Cheryl L. Harris makes visible in “Whiteness as Property,” land and race were transformed into property through white supremacist technologies within colonialism.¹⁴ Land and racial identities are commodifiable and how we relate to these social constructions of land and race are based on systems of rights to these commodities. Rights are exclusionary technologies that classify the privileged and the unprivileged. While they are defining who has rights, they are simultaneously distinguishing who does not. Indigenous is an identity that has rights to native land. White is a race that has the right to occupy Indigenous land. Black is a racial identity that has no right to either.

¹¹ Garba and Sorentino, "Slavery is a Metaphor," 776-778.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 210-211.

¹⁴ Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, No. 8 (1993): 1707–1791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.

While Indigenous is an identity and slavery is only constituted as an “ascribed structural position,” I argue Black is a new identity produced through colonial systems.¹⁵ Before colonialism, Indigenous Africans had native tongues, names, and land. Through the violence of the institution of slavery, those who were trafficked through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade had their connection to their indigeneity severed. These displaced Indigenous peoples were placed onto new lands and over generations they were denied access to their names and native languages. Through this process of de-indigenization across hundreds of years, Indigenous Africans in the New World were transformed into Black Afro-diasporic peoples. What was present before the colonial transmutation into Blackness is not as relevant as the truth that Black people now exist and have no land.

Colonial violence impacted different communities at varying intensities, but globally the strategies of colonizers were consistent. I dive deeper into some history of colonization in Brazil within Chapter Three, but I do wish to return to this history to provide an example that shows how colonized people share similar wounds. Stealing land and displacing Indigenous people is a strategy of genocide that impacted both Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africa. Almost simultaneously as the Portuguese Empire was setting up their colonies in the New World, they also used their control to infiltrate and settle in West African communities known now as Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. The Indigenous Africans that were trafficked across the Atlantic were disconnected from their land and transformed into non-human laborers by the machine of colonialism. Though, enslaved peoples were not always just Indigenous Africans. In Portuguese America, Indigenous peoples native to the New World were the original enslaved peoples of the Portuguese colony. They experienced similar technologies of genocide and

¹⁵ Tuck and Yang. “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” 7.

violence that come from the institution of slavery. All people under Portuguese rule were forced to lose their religion, adorn the colonial dress, and speak the colonizer's language. The way decolonial studies discuss Black and Indigenous oppression under colonialism often presents these struggles as if they are isolated. When historically, from the moment they met, Indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas have always been related. Black and Indigenous peoples share similar struggles at different intensities, but nonetheless, these colonial technologies have viewed them both as equally undesirable.

All people cannot be decolonized through the land. I am not saying that land should be disregarded or deprioritized. Rather we should work simultaneously both within the literal and metaphoric realms towards decolonial futures. If the land is our only path to decolonization, then the Afro-diasporic person would be doomed to drown in the depths of the ocean. Amongst the Atlantic and within the slave ship are the closest memories of land we have to our origins, and the bottom of the ocean is the only place our ancestors lie uncontested. As scholars invested in decolonial futures, we must not take for granted that a pre-Blackness or a pre-Slavery is not accessible to the Afro-diasporic body. For this reason, I reiterate that decolonization is not about returning or a reversal to a pre-colonial state of being. We must take into consideration our relatives that have developed new ways of being as a product of colonialism. Black peoples are Indigenous relatives and the wounds we harbor are the wounds of having no nation and no land. If we only understand slavery for its labor, then we undermine the acute anti-Indigenous violence African Indigenous ancestors experienced. If we label Black relatives as pseudo-settlers, then we erase the current colonial violence Afro-diasporic people experience daily. If we do not account for Blackness in decolonial thought, then we risk reproducing hierarchies and binaries.

Decolonization must contend with the circumstances created by colonialism. Ideologies and institutions that emerged from colonialism are now part of our collective consciousness. Garba and Sorrentino successfully unpack how the children of dispossessed Indigenous Africans are often eliminated twofold in the conversation of settler colonialism. In addition to the literal removal from our Indigenous lands and life, African peoples and their descendants often have their Indigeneity undermined completely in the discourse of settler colonialism. The purpose of this critique is to say that Black people of the US and the diaspora more generally are inextricable from larger conversations of decolonization.

Furthermore, since I argue that land cannot be the foundation upon which decolonization rests, I affirm the importance of a decolonial praxis that may be interpreted by some as a metaphor. I do not wish to assert a new universalizing truth that all institutions are able to be decolonized nor do I wish to argue that for some institutions decolonization will be an impossible task. My truth is that I am in no position to make these sorts of assertions. At this moment, with the knowledge I hold now, I am able to see a path toward decolonization within museums. I argue that decolonization is not just about the return of Indigenous lands and life but also building new worlds/lands that account for dispossessed global Indigenous relatives. Decolonization requires that we move away from colonialism while considering the harm and circumstances it has created.

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