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Changing the rules of the road

Post-colonialism and the new ethics of museum anthropology

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Introduction

Richard West, former director of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), summed up the impact of post-colonialism on museum anthropology with this simple line: “the rules of the road have changed.”¹ West was referring specifically to how research and scholarship on Native cultures at NMAI would be different from previous anthropological approaches, but his words carried much broader implications. They signaled a profound shift in the power relations vis-à-vis museums and source communities, or, “communities from which museum collections originate,”² and whose “voice” would be dominant in the museum. For West, it was not so much that the anthropological enterprise had been wrong, but, more so, was incomplete because it had not included the Native voice to any sizable degree.

This chapter examines changes that have taken place in museum anthropology³ over the past thirty years or more as a result of the post-colonial critique of museums, and how these shifts have been engendering a stronger sense of ethical responsibility toward source communities as indigenous peoples have asserted greater control over how their cultural heritage is studied, interpreted and curated in museums. It considers several key developments: the process of decolonizing museums in Europe (specifically, the Netherlands) and settler nations like the United States and the passage and implementation in the US of both the National Museum of the American Indian Act (1989) and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990). I discuss how these developments have fostered collaborative relationships between museums and source communities, giving rise to more culturally appropriate and ethically responsible museological practice. This is especially evident in new attitudes and approaches toward the treatment and repatriation of human remains and culturally sensitive objects as well as toward the revision of professional museum codes of ethics. Such trends mark a radical shift in the museum world from a primary focus on objects and material culture, to an emphasis on people and their relationships to tangible and intangible culture. As Besterman writes, “ethics defines the relationship of the museum with people, not with things.”⁴

Taken together, these trends mark a humanistic turn in museum anthropology that places cultural and human rights at the center of museological discourse and practice.

They also signal a dramatic rethinking of museological ethics. It is now apparent that what has been considered ethically appropriate in one historical period and cultural context may not be in others. Museums should be concerned not only with "best practices," but also how practices need to be continually reassessed in light of new perspectives and ethical concerns.

Post-colonialism and the Post-colonial Critique of Museums

The term post-colonial has come to mean many things and encompass a broad range of topics, disciplines and theoretical approaches. For some, post-colonial simply refers to the period which begins with the withdrawal of Western colonial rule in overseas territories and during which former colonies became independent, roughly the 1940s and 1950s. However, others use post-colonial to describe all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact onward, emphasizing how post-colonial societies continue to be subject to neo-colonial forms of dominance. Hence, post-colonialism can be seen as a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction. The point of departure for post-colonial studies is the historical fact of European colonialism, and the diverse material and ideological effects to which the phenomenon gave rise.⁵ Postcolonial theory and studies address the experiences of "migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe."⁶ They also critically examine the effects of imperialism within "settler/invader" societies such as those of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific island nations.

Post-colonial theory has now permeated many fields, including anthropology and museology, although it initially was associated primarily with literary criticism. In the literary context, the term post-colonial described a body of work on the persistence of colonial representations of the non-European "other" and has largely concerned the critical analysis of discursive practices and cultural strategies of imperial institutions. The field was influenced most notably by Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978). For Said:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' ... Taking the late eighteenth and nineteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.⁷

Not surprisingly, post-colonial theory has had a significant impact on anthropology in general, and museum anthropology in particular, given the fields' colonial legacy

and historical preoccupation with collecting, studying and representing "others." The post-colonial critique of museums coincided with the "reflexive turn" in anthropology in which anthropologists turned their gaze on their own work to interrogate power relations embedded in their discipline. Literature covering the post-colonial critique of museums as well as reflexive anthropology began to emerge in the 1980s, and is now extensive.⁸ The post-colonial critique of museums problematizes the museum concept and museological practices, revealing their Eurocentric epistemological biases and assumptions; and how museum collections, as products and tools of colonialism, are embedded in power relations. Postcolonial museum theorists have been exploring questions like:

What impact did the imposition of colonial power have on indigenous societies and on cultural production within them? How have objects imported or appropriated from colonies been displayed at the imperial centre? What impact do the power relations of colonialism have on the interpretation of objects? What are the possibilities for the display of 'colonial' objects in the present day and how can contemporary museum practice address the inheritance of colonialism?⁹

In addition to the scholarly community's critique of museums, source communities have also "encouraged an assessment of the positionings of museums within Western colonial culture."¹⁰ As Nicks has pointed out, contemporary relationships between museums and source communities, "which can range from contestations over the interpretation and ownership of collections to the possibility of collaboration and shared authority, make sense when seen against the background of colonial histories."¹¹ Over the past several decades, source communities have challenged basic premises of conventional museological and anthropological paradigms. Most of the dramatic changes that have taken place in museums of anthropology over the past few decades directly linked to these challenges. Today, museums are urged to establish "on-going dialogue and partnerships with indigenous communities and to define a framework for respectful collaboration in the restoration of that inherent human right—the right to be the custodian of your own culture."¹²

Decolonizing Museums

The post-colonial critique of museums and the ensuing changes in ethics can be seen, on the whole, as part of an on-going process of decolonizing Western museums, defined here as a process of acknowledging the historical, colonial contingencies under which collections were acquired; revealing Eurocentric ideology and biases in the Western museum concept, discourse and practice; acknowledging and including diverse voices and multiple perspectives; and transforming museums through sustained critical analysis and concrete actions. The decolonization of museums has taken distinct forms and has been carried out at varying paces in different historical, national and sociocultural contexts. In several European countries some museums began to undergo decolonization some fifty or more years ago while in the Americas the process did not really get underway until the 1980s.

The Tropical Museum, or Tropenmuseum, in Amsterdam, for instance, was a product and tool of Dutch colonialism that, beginning in the 1950s, was transformed into an institution dedicated to increasing cross-cultural awareness and international cooperation. The Tropenmuseum's transition from a colonial to a post-colonial museum mirrored changes taking place in Dutch society as it confronted its colonial past and the changing nature of its relationships with former colonized people.

The forerunner of the Tropenmuseum was the Colonial Museum founded in Haarlem (1864) by the Society to Stimulate Trade and Industry. The Society promoted commercial interests in Dutch colonial territories, such as the Dutch East Indies, now the Republic of Indonesia. The Colonial Museum was designed to give the Dutch public a view of life in the colonies, both that of native populations and of the colonizers. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century museum exhibits represented the production processes of export products such as coffee, sugar, rubber, textiles and so forth as well as ethnographic information on the people who made them. Exhibits highlighted native people's "simple" technology in contrast to the more "sophisticated" technology of the West. The ideology behind the exhibits was clear: colonialism could be justified on the basis of how it was bringing progress, civilization and development to the colonies. In short, how and why the museum exhibited non-Western people's cultures reflected colonial interests and ideology. Tony Bennett, in his often cited piece "The Exhibitionary Complex," describes how this was a common strategy of imperial displays:

The effects of these developments were to transfer the rhetoric of progress from the relations between stages of production to the relations between races and nations by superimposing the associations of the former on the latter. In the context of imperial displays, subject peoples were thus represented as occupying the lowest levels of manufacturing civilization. Reduced to displays of 'primitive' handicrafts and the like, they were represented as cultures without momentum except for that benignly bestowed on them from without through the improving mission of the imperialist powers.¹³

In 1910 the Colonial Museum was moved to Amsterdam and merged with the Colonial Institute, which was primarily dedicated to research and training colonial civil servants, missionaries and others working in the colonies.¹⁴

After World War II and the loss of Dutch colonies, the Colonial Museum had to reorient its mission since its former mandate was no longer relevant. The Colonial Museum was renamed the Tropical Museum and became part of the Royal Tropical Institute (Koninkrijk Instituut voor de Tropen) in 1950.¹⁵ At this time, the museum's ethnographic purview expanded to include regions beyond former colonial territories such as Africa, the Middle East, South America and Southern Asia. During the 1960s, the museum also had to reassess its audience because, through television, print media and travel, museum visitors were becoming more aware of the economic, social and political realities of people living in so-called developing areas or the "Third World." Furthermore, people who were represented in the museum as colonial subjects in the past were now members of Dutch society. Consequently, the museum was pressured to bring its exhibits up to date and present a more realistic,

contemporary and socially relevant picture of people's lives. Throughout the 1970s, the museum's exhibits and programming focused on the theme of development and exhibits took on an "emancipatory" and consciousness-raising approach, covering topics like poverty, education, agriculture, human rights and international cooperation.¹⁶ The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Development Cooperation became the museum's main source of financial support as it continues to be.

Over the decades, the Tropenmuseum has remained dedicated to working in the reflexive mode, periodically stepping back to reassess its mission, programs and exhibitions in light of its colonial past. In December 2008, the museum celebrated the completion of a ten-year, large-scale renovation project with an international symposium called "Tropenmuseum for a Change." Speakers from the Netherlands and abroad discussed the role and relevance of an ethnographic museum with such a prominent colonial legacy in the twenty-first century, and in the multicultural, globalized country the Netherlands had become.¹⁷

Two new, permanent exhibitions at the Tropenmuseum also address its history and the Dutch colonial past in general. "Netherlands East Indies" takes visitors through 350 years of Dutch colonial history, beginning with the activities of the Dutch East Indies Company, proceeding to the final years of colonial rule and the independence of the East Indies. The exhibition "Eastward Bound: Art, Culture, and Colonialism" focuses on the history and culture of Southeast Asia and Oceania, and, according to the museum's website, "contributes to today's debate on national and cultural identity and the relevance of colonial history to today's society."¹⁸

In sum, the Tropenmuseum continues to undergo decolonization by facing up to its past and taking a moral and ethical stance. It exemplifies how museums as social institutions and part of public culture do not exist as isolated entities in society, but evolve in response to shifting social values, mores and ethics. But the Tropenmuseum has not merely reflected these trends, it has also helped shape them as an agent of social change and consciousness raising—to many, an increasingly important role for twenty-first century, post-colonial museums.¹⁹

The decolonization of museums in the United States did not gain momentum until the late 1980s, although the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s set the process in motion as African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and other ethnic minorities, as well as women's rights organizations, began to pressure museums to be more inclusive. The turning point for museum anthropology came with the passage of the National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAIA) in 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 by the United States Congress.

The Impact of the NMAIA and NAGPRA on Museum Anthropology

The NMAIA and NAGPRA are laws enacted to redress wrongs committed against Native Americans after centuries of contact with Western civilization and under conditions of internal colonialism.²⁰ Despite the many pitfalls and criticisms of both NMAIA and NAGPRA,²¹ their passage and implementation has had a

profound impact on museums and anthropology, and were a catalyst for decolonizing museums in the United States.

Although a formal apology and reparations have yet to come from the United States government for the genocidal policies inflicted on Native peoples, the NMAIA and NAGPRA can be seen as symbols of cultural restitution and a step in that direction. Cultural restitution is a process in which the historical conditions under which objects and remains were acquired are acknowledged and rectified through concrete actions.

The NMAIA's objectives were fivefold. In addition to authorizing the repatriation of Native American human remains and sacred and ceremonial objects held specifically in Smithsonian collections, it authorized the purchase of the collections of the Museum of the American Indian, located in New York City. The museum was founded by George Gustav Heye, a wealthy New York banker who amassed some 800,000 objects over sixty years of collecting. The collection was considered the largest body of Native American material ever accumulated by one person, and contained objects representing indigenous cultures from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic.

The Act provided for the construction of a new museum in New York to house part of the Heye collection, plus a library of 40,000 volumes related to the archaeology, ethnology, and history of Native American peoples. This new museum opened in November 1994. The Act also funded the construction of a Cultural Resource Center in Suitland, Maryland, which opened in 1998. It functions as the museum's research and collections storage facility. The final component, and some would say the centerpiece of the Act, is the museum located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It is the first national museum solely devoted to the study, preservation and exhibition of the life, languages, history, arts and cultures of Native Americans.

The NMAI has been described as a "post-colonial," "decolonized" museum that offers a new paradigm for the interpretation and representation of Native peoples.²² Opening on 21 September 2004, the museum was the culmination of some fifteen years of planning. For Rick West, founding director and member of the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, it represents an opportunity for reconciliation and the recognition of the legitimate place of First Nations in the histories of the Americas. Facing the United States' Capital building alongside other Smithsonian national museums, the NMAI occupies a profoundly symbolic space. West saw the museum as a cultural and spiritual marker on the mall—a long overdue monument to the first nations of this hemisphere that celebrates their achievements and continual vitality. Certainly, one of the museum's goals is to dispel images of the "vanishing Indian" and other stereotypes of Native peoples, past and present, and to impress on visitors that Native cultures are still very much alive. Showing how the histories of Native peoples and Euroamericans are intertwined is also central to the Museum's mission.

The post-colonial museum is fundamentally about inverting power relations and the voice of authority. In the post-colonial museum the voice of authority is no longer that of anthropologists, art historians and professional museum workers, but the voices of the people whose cultures are represented in museums. At NMAI "Native voice," worldviews and philosophies have shaped nearly every

aspect of the museum. In the following passage, West describes what Native voice means in the museum:

Native people possess important and authoritative knowledge about themselves and their cultures, past and present, and deserve to be at the Museological table of interpretation and representation ... Exhibitions at the National Museum of the American Indian are developed in partnership with Native people. This practice is based on the belief that indigenous people are best able to teach others about themselves. Their understanding of who they are and how they present themselves to the world is what the museum calls 'Native voice.'²³

Shannon, an anthropologist who conducted ethnographic research on the collaborative process behind the creation of the museum's exhibitions, states that "community curating is the method through which NMAI constructs 'Native voice' ... and gives the museum its legitimization as a Native museum, one which ethically presents Native voice."²⁴ In the process of planning the museum, staff met with more than 500 Native people from approximately 300 communities across the Americas to determine the design of the various facilities as well as the contents of exhibitions and programming.

In addition to presenting alternative ways of interpreting and representing Native cultures, the NMAI has been a leader in establishing guidelines for curating Native materials in culturally appropriate ways. These guidelines suggest how objects, especially those considered sacred or culturally sensitive, are to be handled, stored, conserved and displayed in accordance with Native protocols. Particularly significant is how Native methods of traditional care are being integrated into the management and care of collections through its "Culturally Sensitive Collections Care Program."²⁵

At the Cultural Resource Center in Suitland, Maryland, one can see examples of how the philosophy behind traditional care is put into practice.²⁶ For example, objects may be arranged and stored on the basis of Native classification systems, which reflect traditional values and customs associated with the use and meaning of particular objects. Some are organized according to their gender or status while others are aligned to the cardinal directions, depending on specific tribal dictates.

To many Native peoples, certain objects are animate, living entities, imbued with a life force that must be appropriately cared for. Special provisions are made for these objects such as the construction of customized containers that allow them to breathe or be taken out periodically for ritual cleansing. To accommodate these practices, NMAI has created a space for the ceremonial feeding or smudging of objects and the performance of other rituals. This perception of objects as alive stands in sharp contrast to how objects have been conventionally perceived and treated in mainstream museums. It also shows how traditional care methods are intended to protect not only an object's material integrity but also its spiritual integrity, reflecting a particular community's religious and cultural protocols regarding the use and treatment of certain kinds of objects.

Access to some objects is restricted in keeping with tribal traditions and wishes. For some tribes, certain objects were never intended to be seen by all tribal

members. Some can only be viewed or touched by men, others by women, while others only belong to the domain of particular clan members, societies, families, and so on. In this case, the museum may post signs to alert staff to the object's status. Similarly, knowledge about certain objects may also be restricted due to its sacred or secret nature. Only those who have earned or inherited rights to this knowledge are allowed to possess it.

Following NMAI's model of culturally appropriate and ethical curatorship, many museums, professional organizations and universities in the United States now have published guidelines for curating culturally sensitive, ceremonial and sacred objects, such as the Association of Art Museum Director's Report on the *Stewardship and Acquisition of Sacred Objects* (2006), *Stewards of the Sacred* published by the American Association of Museums and Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University (2004), and the Minnesota Historical Society's *Caring for American Indian Objects. A Practical Guide* (2004).²⁷

In some museums, culturally sensitive materials as well as human remains are now separated from general collections and stored in areas where access is restricted to tribal representatives and designated museum staff. In many museums, human remains and culturally sensitive and sacred objects have been removed from public display as a requirement of NAGPRA and out of respect for Native wishes.²⁸

The passage of NAGPRA was the culmination of decades of struggle on the part of Native American tribal governments, activists, lawyers and their supporters to protect graves against desecration, repatriate thousands of ancestral human remains and return stolen or improperly acquired property to Native Americans. According to Trope and Echo-Hawk, who were both involved in deliberations leading up to the passage of the Law, NAGPRA was landmark legislation because it represented fundamental changes in the attitudes toward Native peoples by the museum and scientific communities as well as the public. Although some see NAGPRA primarily as cultural property law, others, like Trope and Echo-Hawk, assert that "NAGPRA is, first and foremost, human rights legislation. It is designed to redress the flagrant violation of the 'civil rights of America's first citizens.'"²⁹

The Act constituted a compromise among the different ethical principles, values and interests of the museum, scientific and Native American communities. And although the concessions made by the different parties can certainly be debated, the processes it created and actions it facilitated have taught us much about how to reconcile what can at first seem like irreconcilable differences. This is largely because the Act emphasized face to face consultations and negotiation, measures that have inadvertently opened doors to many unanticipated but fruitful outcomes such as greater dialogue, engagement and collaboration between museums and source communities.

Under NAGPRA, museums receiving any form of federal funding are required to comply with the law. In addition to protecting burial sites, it provides a process for museums and Federal agencies to repatriate Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects or objects of cultural patrimony to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated tribes, as well as Native Hawaiian organizations.³⁰ NAGPRA also requires museums to make inventories of Native American and Hawaiian human remains and materials in their collections, and in consultation with

tribal representatives and federal agencies to determine their "cultural affiliation." Museums are then required to make these inventories, as well as any pertinent information, available to respective tribes. Once tribal affiliation and appropriate ownership rights are proven, tribes may make a request for repatriation. As of 2006, 31,995 individual human remains, 787,781 funerary objects, 3584 sacred objects and 1045 objects of cultural patrimony had been repatriated to tribal communities.³¹

A number of museums had been working in partnership with Native communities on repatriation claims for years prior to NAGPRA and increasingly sought their input on exhibitions, educational programming and so on. However, there was no consensus within the American museum and scientific communities on repatriation nor laws to dictate practice. In fact, NAGPRA was enacted largely because of the perception that the American professional museum and scientific communities had not done enough to recognize the rights of Native people. As Richard Hill observed, "some museums, mainly smaller ones, responded immediately to the claims of Native peoples without requiring the force of law to compel them. But the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act came about because many of the major museums would not address our concerns."³² Thus, NAGPRA is an example of how a professional body's code of ethics can be inadequate in dealing with particular concerns, and how a law, in turn, can stimulate new ethical agendas. "The law is sometimes the last resort for those confronted by unethical acts."³³

One of the many outcomes of NAGPRA is the growing presence of Native American curators, traditional scholars and advisors in museums. Native points of view are increasingly being heard and challenging conventional museological paradigms and practices. Greater collaboration between museums and Native American communities and the co-curation of collections and exhibitions has increased our knowledge of indigenous curatorial methods, or how communities have traditionally cared for, perceived, valued and interpreted their cultural heritage. These practices are expressions of a particular community's religious beliefs and cultural protocol pertaining to the use, handling and treatment of certain classes of objects and human remains.³⁴

The practice of restricting access to and use of Native American human remains and culturally sensitive objects, for example, in research and exhibitions, has been one of the most contentious aspects of NAGPRA. Some believe restricted access goes against the idea of the museum as a public and democratic institution whose resources and collections are ideally accessible to all. Restricting access to collections as well as repatriating them to indigenous communities is disturbing to some who see these practices as anti-science and against academic freedom. To these constituencies, museums engaging in such practices are placing Native American religious beliefs and values above the values and ethical codes of the scientific community in addition to the public interest. But the public nature of museum collections and curatorial work, in general, is unsettling to many Native communities. For some, the whole concept of collecting objects to be seen, studied, cared for and displayed by people outside their community is inconsistent with tribal traditions.³⁵

While some members of the professional museum community have opposed NAGPRA on legal and scientific grounds, others have embraced the opportunities it

has opened to forge new partnerships with source communities. Collaboration between source communities and museums and the co-curation of collections has led to more culturally appropriate ways to manage and care for collections as well as a deeper understanding and respect for the values and meanings museum objects can hold for source communities.³⁶ Today, repatriation and the respectful treatment of human remains and culturally sensitive materials no longer revolve around questions about the ownership of cultural property. They are now largely viewed as moral and ethical issues that are increasingly being seen as part of people's cultural and human rights.³⁷ The key is continued interaction and dialogue through which all parties may discover shared ethics, values and responsibilities, or, if the case may be, come to an understanding that cultural differences exist and need to be respected.

Post-colonialism and International Museum Ethics

The decolonization of American museums and museum anthropology in the form of the developments described above has also been occurring in other settler nations such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Due to the physical presence and activism of indigenous communities, museums, government agencies and other organizations in these countries have been on the forefront of movements to create more ethical policies and culturally appropriate approaches to cultural heritage management.³⁸ The process of decolonization manifests itself differently in each country based on its historical relationships with indigenous communities; national, regional and local legislation; professional codes of ethics; individual museum policies and procedures; and the particularities of their own museum cultures. Similar to the situation with Native Americans, indigenous populations have been particularly concerned with the treatment and repatriation of human remains and culturally sensitive materials. In response, museums have developed policies and procedures under pressure from and in cooperation with indigenous communities.

European museums as well have been questioning the ethics of past practices regarding the treatment of human remains and culturally sensitive material. The Tropenmuseum, for instance, published Bulletin 375 *Physical Anthropology Reconsidered: Human Remains at the Tropenmuseum* in 2007. The Bulletin discusses the Tropenmuseum's collection of human remains as well as objects made with human remains based on an inventory of the Museum's physical anthropology collection acquired from 1914 to 1964. "The aim of this publication is to contribute to the debate about the significance of the physical anthropology collections around the world, taking the Tropenmuseum collection as an example."³⁹ By publishing an inventory of the collections the Museum hopes to "find a final resting place for these human remains because they no longer have any significance for us as an ethnographic museum."⁴⁰

Debates within the international museum community on repatriation and the treatment of culturally sensitive materials have motivated professional museum associations to revise their codes of ethics to acknowledge changing attitudes and to provide guidelines for museums workers to follow. The 2006 Code of Ethics of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)⁴¹ makes reference to human remains and culturally sensitive materials in Sections 2, 3, 4 and 6 regarding how these

collections should be acquired, displayed, used and returned if a museum is requested to do so. For example, Section 2.5, "Culturally Sensitive Material," recommends that:

Collections of human remains and material of sacred significance should be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully. This must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated, where these are known.

Section 6.2 suggests that "Museums should be prepared to initiate dialogues for the return of cultural property to a country or people of origin," and, in general, cooperate with source communities through the sharing of knowledge, documentation and other resources.

The American Association of Museums also includes in its Code of Ethics for Museums, adopted in 1993, a clause pertaining to the treatment of human remains in its section on Collections. It states: "The unique and special nature of human remains and funerary and sacred objects is recognized as the basis of all decisions concerning such collections."⁴²

Codes of ethics are intended to guide behavior and set standards of ethical practice. They are not laws, and, in fact, generally call for standards of conduct higher than those set by laws. Professional codes of ethics are also considered living documents because they continue to evolve in response to changing values, situations and social movements. For instance, both the ICOM and AAM codes have been revised several times. In this respect, we can see how ethical codes are relative to particular historical, social, national and cultural contexts, just like ethical principles in general. As a case in point, ICOM makes clear in its Code that each ICOM member or member institution has the right to participate in ICOM according to their own national committees and standards. Implicit in this statement is that members are not necessarily bound to ICOM's Code of Ethics.

Conclusion

The rules of the road are certainly changing for the anthropological museum world. The post-colonial critique of museums and challenges from source communities have generated new paradigms for museological practice. But while much progress has been made over the past few decades in decolonizing museums and cultivating a greater sense of ethical responsibility toward source communities, the process has been uneven in both time and place as well as in the degree to which a museum is decolonizing. Some question if it is even possible for Western, mainstream museums to ever truly become decolonized, given their colonial legacies and their location in the power structure of dominant societies.

Lonetree contests the assertion that the NMAI is a "decolonizing museum" on the grounds that it does not present a clear and coherent understanding of colonialism and its on-going effects in its historical exhibits. The exhibits "fail to tell the hard truths of colonization and the genocidal acts that have been committed against

Indigenous peoples.”⁴³ In this regard, NMAI stands in contrast to the Tropenmuseum which has been problematizing its colonial roots and legitimacy for decades through exhibitions, symposia, publications and international development aid and projects.

It is also important to keep in mind that what to some is a progressive development to others is old wine in a new bottle. Collaboration and “partnering” for some source communities are just alternative words for cultural appropriation and forms of neo-colonialism. As in all “contact zone” situations we have to consider what the terms of collaboration and partnership are and who is setting, defining and managing them.

Museum anthropology is still a politically charged arena, and perhaps this is how it should be because it is only through sustained critical analysis that the field can be continually transformed and reinvented to meet the challenges of the day. Despite the fact that Indigenous peoples have been a primary force in transforming and decolonizing museums, as well as moving us toward more ethical practice, they remain significantly under-represented in both the scholarly and public discourse on museums and in the professional museum and anthropological communities.⁴⁴ Full participation and inclusivity remain an ideal to which we continue to aspire.

Galla argued in his chapter “Indigenous People, Museums, and Ethics,” published in Edson’s *Museum Ethics*, that museums have lagged behind other social institutions in addressing social justice and human rights issues.⁴⁵ Recent developments are reversing this tendency, however. In the spirit of reconciliation and cultural restitution museums are grappling with our need to respect cultural diversity with the concomitant need to reach consensus on what constitutes ethical behavior and practice.

What we are witnessing is a humanistic turn in museum anthropology in which a history of detached scientific objectivity and aversion to politics is giving way to advocacy and engagement. This trend represents nothing less than a new sense of ethical responsibility to our core subject—humanity.

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Notes

- 1 R. West, “Research and Scholarship at the National Museum of the American Indian: The New ‘Inclusiveness,’” *Museum Anthropology* 17: 1, 1993, pp. 5–8.

- 2 L. Peers and A. Brown, *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, London: Routledge, 2003.
- 3 "Museum anthropology" is used here to refer to the subfield of anthropology devoted to the study, collection, interpretation and representation of material and visual culture, as well as the visual and performing arts, cross-culturally. It also refers to anthropological work in and about museums, including research, curatorial work and education. "Museum of anthropology," "anthropology museum," and "ethnographic museum" can mean any type of museum, i.e., art, history, natural history, ethnographic and so on that houses collections and materials (historic or archaeological) primarily from non-Western cultures. A concise definition is difficult because anthropology museums take different forms in different contexts. For example, in Europe "ethnological" or "ethnographic" museums, or museums entirely devoted to ethnology, are common. However, this museum type is less common in the United States (except perhaps at universities) where ethnographic and archaeological collections can be housed in history, natural history and art museums.
- 4 T. Besterman, "Museum Ethics" in S. Macdonald (ed.) *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 432–441.
- 5 B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, "Introduction" in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin (eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 1–4.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
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- 16 Material presented here on the Tropenmuseum is based on research conducted in the Netherlands in 1987 on the history of Dutch ethnographic museums. This research culminated in my thesis *Decolonizing Anthropology Museums*. Follow up research was carried out in subsequent visits in 1999, 2005 and 2008.
- 17 See the museum's website for video presentations and more information on the symposium. Online. Available HTTP: www.tropenmuseum.nl (accessed 2 May 2010). See also D. Van Dartel (ed.) *Tropenmuseum for a Change! Present Between Past and Future: A Symposium Report*, Bulletin 391. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2009. I was invited to participate in the symposium based on my long-standing research on the museum and its historical development. Thus, I participated in the symposium discussions and visited the exhibitions described in the text.
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- 41 The International Council of Museums (ICOM) operates under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is an international, non-governmental organization of professional museum workers dedicated to the improvement and advancement of the world's museums, the museum profession and museological interests. ICOM's headquarters is located in Paris, France.
- 42 American Association of Museums Code of Ethics for Museums 2000, p. 8. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/upload/Code-of-Ethics-for-Museums.pdf> (accessed 29 April 2010).
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