Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited

Robin B. Boast

Author:

Dr. Robin B. Boast

Deputy Director, MAA: Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3DZ, UK. robin.boast@maa.cam.ac.uk.

Abstract:

Ever since James Clifford's 1997 essay, *Museums as Contact Zones*, museums have been promoting their post-colonial status through inclusionist programs in exhibitions, storage and use of collections. Where there are *indigenous* stakeholders, we have seen an unprecedented improvement in the empowerment of source community stakeholders in the management, use and presentation of their patrimony in museums. So influential was Clifford's essay that the contact zone is now more or less synonymous with these inclusionist, collaborative programs. This paper, while being openly supportive of such collaborations in museums, is nevertheless critical of the use of the contact zone concept in museums. Returning to Clifford's essay, as well as those of Pratt and others, this paper questions why we perpetuate only a partial and rosy portrait of the contact zone, despite clear warning from both Clifford and Pratt about its inherent asymmetry. The goal is not to undermine the ethically engaged work that has been done, but to expose the dark underbelly of the contact zone and, hence, the anatomy of the museum that seems to be persistently neocolonial.

Keywords:

neocolonialism, postcolonialism, museum studies, contact zones, local knowledge

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Introduction

Ever since James Clifford's 1997 essay, *Museums as Contact Zones*, museums have been promoting their now realized post-colonial status through inclusionist programs in exhibitions, storage and use of collections. Where there are *indigenous* stakeholders, there have been a large number of programs that have sought to empower these source community stakeholders. Imbroglios persist (Phillips 2007), but we have seen an unprecedented improvement in the inclusion and empowerment of source community stakeholders in the management, use and presentation of their patrimony in museums (Phillips 2005). Dialogue and collaboration is the name of the game these days and there are few museums with anthropological, or even archaeological, collections who would consider an exhibition which did not include some form of consultation. So influential was Clifford's essay that the contact zone is now more or less synonymous with these inclusionist, collaborative programs.

For example, since 2004 the Manchester Museum has had a film studio for recording dialogues with source community experts about objects in the collection. According to the Museum's web site, "The Contact Zone, the Museum's first permanent film studio, opened in September 2007 with a special ceremony by a Yoruba chief, and attended by

many of the Museum's community partners. It is intended to be an active, informal and relaxed space for Collective Conversations." (Manchester Museum 2006).

One of the best known examples of the application of the idea of the contact zone is the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology's (MoA) Renewal Project, "A Partnership of Peoples," which includes a number of new spaces and new approaches to museum storage and presentation, "including a new Research Centre, Major Temporary Exhibition Gallery, and Community Suite. Together, they support collaborative, socially responsible, and interdisciplinary research across local, national, and international borders." (MoA RRN 2008). The project has been collaborative from the beginning with a Community Advisory Committee convened to write the original application consisting of representatives of the academic disciplines, 'Lower Mainland' community groups and First Nations. As Ruth Phillips, the then Director of the MoA, recalls it:

> We revisit our own traditions and our institutional experience across these past twenty-five years that have seen so much change in museum practices and ways of doing research. The moment of clarity comes when we realize two things. First, the locus of 'innovation' has been in front of us all along in the new collaborative and multivocal models of research with community partners that MoA has helped to pioneer. Second, we realize that although new technologies have the capacity to revolutionize access to and research on museum collections, the key applications have not yet been developed. (Phillips 2005, 106-107)

Another institution that has gone further to incorporate such contact zone practices is the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institution. Dialogue and collaboration are incorporated into the Mission Statement and Collections Policy of the NMAI. As Rosoff points out, the NMAI encourages,

> … 'the direct and meaningful participation of Indian people' in all aspects of the museum's activities. In addition to providing detailed procedures for documentation, acquisition, repatriation, exhibition, care and handling, and other museum functions, the Collections Policy "respects and endeavors to incorporate the cultural protocols of Indian people that define: cultural and religious sensitivities, needs, and norms; the utilization of cultural knowledge and information; and restrictions outlined by specific tribal groups" … (Rosoff 2003:72)

While I hope that all museums welcome these changes, and we must all agree that this new spirit of collaboration has made relations between collecting institutions and their stakeholders far more equitable, I nevertheless have become increasingly concerned with the museum as contact zone. I, therefore, walk a thin line here. On one hand welcoming the new collaboration and consultation, and, on the other, raising a serious concern that the neocolonial nature of these contact zones could destroy the very empowerment that it is meant to engender. This paper returns to Clifford's essay, as well as those of Pratt and others, to question why we perpetuate only a partial and rosy portrait of the contact zone. My goal is not to undermine what good work has been done, but to expose the dark underbelly of the contact zone and, hence, the anatomy of the museum practice that seems to be persistently neocolonial.

What is a Contact Zone?

In Mary Louise Pratt's original article on the contact zone , *The Arts of the Contact Zone* (1991), she defined the contact zone as a "term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991:34). The contact zones that Pratt went on to describe, expand and discuss in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

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Transculturation (1992), were deeply asymmetrical (i.e. unequal) spaces where a dominant culture would provide for a “negotiated” space for certain kinds of cultural exchange, negotiations and transactions necessary to the maintenance of the imperialistic program.

In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt explores how travel writing created a bi-directional tableau and, hence, shaped relations between the European metropole and the non-European periphery. She moves the academic interest of the early 1990s into the textual analysis of cultural studies within the historical context of European imperialism. In doing so, she managed to break down the binary opposition of the metropole and the periphery, masculine and feminine, and white and non-white to establish a more subtle relation of cross-cultural negotiation and translation. Her key theme in this book was the process of *transculturation* – a term borrowed from the Cuban Sociologist Fernando Ortiz (1940). Pratt (1991:35) initially describes transculturation as a "processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture." These highly selective, reciprocal, but unequal, exchanges create, however, a two-way dialogue that both defines the colonial other, but also redefines the metropole.

It is in this respect, that of Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, that post-modernist museum studies and museum anthropology have appropriated the contact zone. We can see this appropriation in Phillips' (2005:93) museum "Considered in terms of newer constructs of colonial contact zones and transculturation", and Mason's (2006:25) museum as “a permeable space to transcultural encounter." Even Mason’s appropriations of Clifford's original paper emphasizes the transcultural:

> He [Clifford] writes: '[a] contact perspective views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization' (1997:213). Viewed in this light, the term "museum" is understood as a much more flexible and expansive way of describing a whole range of relations and activities which surround the valuation, collection, and display of cultures and histories. (Mason 2006:25)

What is common to these and subsequent, descriptions of the museum as contact zone is the two-pronged character of the contact zone, that of the dialogical space and that of transculturation.

Museum as Contact Zone

As Ruth Phillips implies in her paper about the second museum age (2005), museums have been going through major changes over the past 30 years. These changes began in the late 1970s with a major re-orientation of the museum’s primary goal that was termed "the new museology." While other terms are now more popular to describe this movement, the original definition of this movement remains useful as a guide to its implications and influences. Some argue that the movement arose from the International Council of Museums redefinition of museums in 1974 (ICOM n.d.), others from De Varine's (1978) definition, and others from Peter Vergo's (1989) edited volume of the same name. Aside from origin seeking, at the core of the new museology is an assumption that the museum is not a centre of research nor primarily a collecting institution, but an educational instrument. The goal of the new museology was, and largely still is, the transformation of social practices through the transformation of the museum from a display of singular expert accounts to a site of different educational engagements.

At the core of the body of museum studies research that has been undertaken over the past 20 years is a particular set of assumptions about the social and political nature of

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the processes by which knowledge is produced and reproduced in the museum context. A summary of this set of assumptions could be as follows:

- Knowledge is fundamentally relative. The nature of reality is dependent on the perspective from which it is observed.
- The procedures and practices by which an individual comes to know are inherently social. Each of the conversations through which an individual generates and shares knowledge is a contribution to multiple, simultaneous, ongoing discourses that are, in turn, dynamically situated in multiple overlapping networks of relationships.
- Every sequence of knowledge-claims takes the form of a narrative or story by which the nature of objects may be understood, explained, or accounted for.
- Knowledge is knowledge of (or about) objects; objects are things of (or about) which knowers know. In this sense, knowledge may be said to be embodied in objects. A necessary condition for the generation of knowledge is engagement with objects.

Despite the relativistic and postmodernist foundations of the new museology (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Macdonald 1998; for a critique see Lonetree 2006), museum practice, and much of museum studies, has interpreted these principles through the lens of the educator. No matter how much museum studies have argued for a pluralistic approach to interpretation and presentation, the intellectual control has largely remained in the hands of the museum. The extension of the new museology into museums, over the past 30 years, has introduced a regime where the educator and the marketing manager control the voices of the museum's presentations for a relatively narrow, selective view of "public" interest (Shelton 2001).

There has been a renewed motivation to reconnect research and practice, as identified by Macdonald (2006) and Phillips (2005), as a core component of a "second wave" of "the new museology" that has emerged since 2000. Some of the operations that have been examined from new perspectives, and transformed as a result of such analyses are collections development, exhibit display, conservation, storage, and museum education. Curatorial staff, for example, have long appreciated that by selecting only some kinds of objects for acquisition, preservation and public display museums recognize, represent, and affirm the identities of only some communities. Further, that decisions of the kinds taken in the acquisitions process – decisions both about what should be selected and about who should be involved in selection – should continuously be reviewed and questioned.

Along with this development, or perhaps because of it, from the time that James Clifford first associated Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone with museums there has been a growing translation of the idea to fit, implicitly and explicitly, into the goals of a post-modern new museology. Key works of the past 10 years have been Sharon Macdonald's *The Politics of Display* (1998), Anne Witcomb's *Re-imagining the Museum* (2003), Ruth Phillips' *Re-placing Objects* (2005), Anthony Shelton's *Museums and Anthropologies* (2006), Rhiannon Mason's *Culture Theory and Museum Studies* (2006), and the many papers in Laura Peers and Alison Brown's edited volume *Museums and Source Communities* (2003). What characterizes all of these works is their general optimism about the nature of a new collaborative approach to representation in museums. Ruth Phillips recognized, for example, that these "new models of partnership and collaboration … are creating ever more opportunities for Aboriginal intervention into the traditional orientation of the Western museum toward visual inspection and experience" (Phillips 2005:96-97). Further she is finding new forms of association between cultures when collaborations "Considered in terms of newer constructs of colonial contact zones and transculturation, there are other ways in which these objects *are* part of the same historical world" (Phillips 2005:93, original emphasis).

Laura Peers and Alison Brown, in their pivotal work on museums and source communities, emphasized that, "Artefacts in museums embody both the local knowledge and histories that produced them, and the global histories of Western expansion which have resulted in their collection, transfer to museums, and function as sources of new academic and popular knowledge" (2003:4). Explicitly that, "Artefacts function as 'contact zones' – as sources of knowledge and as catalysts for new relationships – both within and between these communities." (2003:4). John Stanton in the same volume states, "Museums are ideally situated within this paradigm, since working with their historic collections reinvigorates contemporary wisdom and understanding, prolonging internal discourses about the nature of history, culture and identity. … The reinvigorated objects in museum collections gain fresh meanings and a new element of engagement for visitors and scholars alike" (2003:151).

Andrea Witcomb, in her work *Re-imagining the Museum*, writes "Rather than understanding the museum as a static, monolithic institution at the centre of power, it is read as an unstable institution attempting to come to grips with the effects of the colonial encounter, an attempt which has both positive and negative affects [sic] on those involved" (2003:89). In Rhiannon Mason's review of Witcomb's book, she reiterates this interpretation that "As 'contact zone,' the museum functions more as a permeable space to transcultural encounter than as a tightly bounded institution disseminating knowledge to its visitors" (2004:25).

However, we also find doubters of this optimistic view of the contact zone. Tony Bennett argued soon after Clifford's essay came out that the new collaboration between museums and source communities was a bit of a ruse, though perhaps a useful one. Bennett sees the contact zone, as a space for cross-cultural dialogues and source community expertise to be merely an extension of the museum as an instrument of governmentality, expressed as multiculturalism (1998:213). Bennett asks are "museums not still concerned to beam their improving messages of cultural tolerance and diversity into civil society as far as they can reach …?" (1998:213).

Andrea Witcomb's (2003) book tries to draw Bennett's negative discourse back to a positive role for the museum as cross-cultural mediator. Witcomb questions Bennett's critique by arguing that museums are not really very concerned with relations of power, and that the process by which museums represent through exhibitions and documentation is far too complicated a process to be reduced in this way – that museums do not simply extend the influence of the elite (Witcomb 2003:17). Further that there is a "range of possible interpretations of the function of museums" (2003:17). Witcomb argues that one of the destructive assumptions about contemporary museums is their association with the narratives of modernity. Museums, for Witcomb, are caught between their traditional role as rational and civilizing institutions and their association with the 'sins of the West.' She argues, ultimately, that just as museums cannot represent their collected world anymore through totalizing visions, neither can the world represent the museum through a totalizing vision of its past, present and future (Witcomb 2003:18).

Rhiannon Mason, in a later work (Mason 2006), has brought the "public" into this diversification of the museum as a post-colonial institution. She argues, as Clifford shows, that as the world outside the museum exerts forces upon the museum, this fact levels a major criticism against the governmental model of Bennett, "namely, that it places too much emphasis on the production side of museums at the expense of the consumption side of the process. As a result, visitors are often overlooked or their responses oversimplified. Yet as is increasingly acknowledged … visitors do not come to museums wholly passive or as blank slates" (Mason 2006:25).

Finally, the most recent apologetic for the museum as a post-colonial institution has been from Anthony Shelton (2006). In an attempt to reinvigorate the claim that museum anthropology is alive and well, especially within anthropology, Shelton argues that:

> Museums are a microcosm of the wider society in which inter-ethnic relations are played out through a struggle over interpretation and control of cultural resources. … It is this new, revitalized sub-discipline of anthropology that, through its dialectical engagement and transformation of its subject, has done much, and can be expected to do much more, in charting new courses not only for ethnographic but for other museum presentations too. (Shelton 2006:79)

What all of these appeals represent is both an attempt by museums, and anthropology museums in particular, to realign themselves within a post-modern critique and to reclaim the ground lost to anthropology in general, and in the museum in particular, as the mediator between the West and the Other (Blaut 1993; Dicks 2000; Clifford 2004). In these accounts, the museum of the second age is becoming a contact zone – a space of consultation, discussion, and conflict resolution. This movement towards deep collaboration and integration of source community and stakeholder voices into the museum – as well as an increased willingness to consult with source communities over matters of storage, conservation and even access (Peers and Brown 2003) – has become a major justification within the museum community for their ongoing relevance and even right to maintain their vast colonial collections (Shelton 2006). However, in this attribution of the museum as a contact zone, what exactly is being claimed? To answer this we need to look again at what Pratt was claiming for the contact zone, and what Clifford was claiming in its application to the museum.

The Third Literate Art of the Contact Zone

In Pratt's original paper (1991), however, she defines another phenomena that is equally an integral part of the contact zone – that of *Autoethnography*. Autoethnography is:

> … a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. (Pratt 1991:34)

Pratt defines autoethnography as one of the "literate arts" of the contact zone. In *The Arts*, Pratt (1991:35-37) uses Guaman Poma's *New Chronicle* as an exemplar of an early autoethnographic text. Poma's letter is an appeal to the King of Spain, written between 1600-1615, in two parts and in two languages, Spanish and Quechua. It is, Pratt argues, written as much for the Quechua speaking people of Peru as for the King of Spain, and uses the European Chronicle as its literary genre. The point, for Pratt, of Poma's *Chronicle* was not only that he used a European literary genre to perform Quechua culture and history, but that it was also an appeal to both the Spanish Crown and the Quechua for the recognition of their cultural and historical significance as a people. The appeal was unsuccessful and the *New Chronicle* laid forgotten in the Spanish archives for centuries. With its resurrection by Pratt, Poma's *Chronicle* has become a prototypic example of the autoethnographic.

However, I think, along with Richard Miller (1994), that the key example in *The Arts* of autoethnography is not Poma's letter and appeal. The problem with Poma's letter is that the colonial context is so prototypical that it does not challenge our perceptions of the context within which the contact zone operates. The autoethnography is too clear, too much of a colonialized appeal within a colonial setting, too much of a literary intervention. When applied to the museum as an exemplar, it obscures the role of the

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autoethnography when applied to such settings, granted which was not Pratt's concern, because it is too easy to see the museum as the site at which such appeals are preserved, re-presented and re-interpreted. The role of the museum, or archive, is obscured as it does not make clear how these objects of the contact zone are being used. Far more useful is the experience of Manuel (Pratt's son) who, being a student, is daily embedded in the contact zone that is education (Pratt 1992:38).

Pratt recalls how her son clearly recognized, within the first few days in his new 'open' school, how such open, collaborative and multivocal spaces as his new school operates. When asked by his mother what it was like in his new school, he responded: "theyre a lot nicer, and they have a lot less rules. But know *why* theyre nicer?" "Why?" his mother asked. "So youll obey all the rules they dont have," he replied (Pratt 1991:38). It is in exactly this way that we see how the museum as contact zone operates. Collaboration, appropriateness and legitimacy are always framed from the point of view of the party in authority, "regardless of what other parties might see themselves as doing" (Pratt 1991:38). Pratt points out to us that in the school if "a classroom is analyzed as a social world unified and homogenized with respect to the teacher, whatever students do other than what the teacher specifies is invisible or anomalous to the analysis. This can be true in practice as well" (1991:38).

In Clifford's use of the contact zone as a collaborative space within the new museum (now too a kind of classroom), he too presents a much more complicated story than is usually represented in later works. In the usually referenced example from *Museums as Contact Zones*, that of the Portland Museum of Art's consultation with Tlingit elders over the Rasmussen collection (Clifford 1997:193), Clifford clearly signals that,

> What transpired in the Portland Museum's basement was not reducible to a process of *collecting* [original emphasis] advice or information. And something in excess of consultation was going on. A message was delivered, performed, *within an ongoing contact history*. (Clifford 1997:193 [emphasis added])

What the museum thought was going on was an elucidation of additional context and information that would enrich the collection. What the people representing the Tlingit were doing was much broader. The objects represented, for them "ongoing stories of struggle," an opportunity to remind the museum of its responsibilities over its stewardship of clan objects, and an appeal to the museum to be accountable in ways that went beyond "mere preservation" and contextualization (Clifford 1997:193).

Collaboration as Autoethnography

> "I'm pleased science has accepted native wisdom, but why did they have to go and create ethno-sciences out of it to explain it to themselves? Our native educators have been drawn into the orbit of "native science" for a variety of reasons so it will take some time for them to see under the rug." (Jim Enote, pers. comm.)

It was not so much the problems of negotiating a new mode of transculturation, nor the lack of understanding on the part of the Portland Museum of Art staff about the necessities of the contact zone, that was the problem here. Something much more intractable was being performed, an aspect of these colonial institutions, and the contact zone, that has largely been left out of the post-Clifford/Pratt discussions. It is the third feature of the contact zone, and contact zone-like engagements – *Autoethnography*.

Autoethnography is as much a part of the contact zone as is transculturation. However, it is the forgotten part. This is very strange, though probably very telling, as both Clifford (1997:213) and Pratt (1991:34) make clear that autoethnography is one of the most significant, and most neocolonial, aspects of all contact zones.

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Pratt makes clear that autoethnographic texts are not forms of self-representation or autochthonous expression. Rather, they are those texts, written by the Other, which mix indigenous idioms within metropolitan and academic modes. Though Pratt (1991:34) argues "Such texts often constitute a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture," this clearly points to a much wider phenomenon, or even mode of dominance, that can be found when the Other finds that they have to make account of themselves.

The problem why autoethnography has been the largely ignored feature of the contact zone may be that Pratt defined autoethnography as a textual mode or genre. In her original *The Arts of the Contact Zone* autoethnography was "a text" (Pratt 1991:34). In her next great contact zone work, *Imperial Eyes* (Pratt 1992), there is no mention of autoethnography as anything but a literary genre. This despite the fact that Pratt recognizes that, like transculturation, "… autoethnography, is a phenomenon of the contact zone." (Pratt 1991:34).

If we return to Clifford's *Museums as Contact Zones* (1997), and the many examples he presents, it seems that the main focus of this essay is to suggest to us that autoethnography is not simply a textual genre, but, perhaps, a rhetorical genre. Though the primary purpose of this paper is a call for museums to "[loosen] their sense of centrality and [see] themselves as specific places of transit, intercultural borders, contexts of struggle and communication between discrepant communities" (Clifford 1997:213), Clifford seems to be suggesting to us throughout the paper that there are also some fundamental asymmetries: "A contact perspective views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization" (Clifford 1997:213).

For Clifford, though, the potential of a "de-centred" museum is a possibility:

> My account argues for a democratic politics that would challenge the hierarchical valuing of different places of crossing. It argues for a decentralization and circulation of collections in a multiplex public sphere, an expansion of the range of things that can happen in museums and museum-like settings. (Clifford 1997:214)

For Clifford, the democratization of these politics, and these settings, is a possibility, and this is the central point of the article. However, it has become increasingly clear, over the past 10 years, that the contact zone has been continuously used by the museum (Bennett 1998:212-213), by "native science" (Enote, pers. comm.), by governmentally of indigenous populations (Hemming and Rigney 2008) as a neocolonial genre. I am arguing here that part of this problem, of the traditional re-appropriation of the contact zone as colonial contact zone, is due to the now ignored role of autoethnography as a fundamental neocolonial rhetorical genre, and even instrument of appropriation.

The Lessons of the Stanford Papuan Sculpture Garden, and the Collaborative Exhibition

One of the accounts from Clifford's contact zones essay that is rarely discussed in the secondary literature is his account of the development of the Papuan Sculpture Garden at Stanford University (1997:195-196). As Clifford recounts, in 1994 a then anthropology student at Stanford, Jim Mason, had raised enough money, mostly through donations and small grants, to bring about a dozen sculptors from the Papuan Highlands to Palo Alto. During that summer, the sculptors, who were staying with local friends and supporters, worked on tree trunks brought from Papua New Guinea and acceptable stone from Nevada to create "human figures entwined with animals, fantastic designs" (1997:195).

> Their workplace was open to everyone passing by and on Friday evenings it turned into a party, with barbecues, face painting, drumming, and dancing. The New Guinea artists taught their designs to interested Palo Altoans. Growing numbers turned up every week to hang out, make art, and celebrate. (Clifford 1997:195)

Clifford goes on to recount how, when he visited the site in the autumn of 1994, the sculptors had returned home to Papua New Guinea and what constituted the "New Guinea Sculpture Garden" were the various carved stones and trunks, secured by cables, covered by plastic and spread around among the other trees. Jim Mason had also begun another fundraising initiative, this time to raise money to erect and secure the sculptures and create a proper sculpture garden. Within a year the garden was taking shape (Clifford 1997:195-196). It now stands on its site, next to the Humanities Center at Stanford University, the sculpted poles and stones set in concrete, replete with lighting and interpretive panels.

We could go on to ask why it took so much effort to bring these particular artists, and to provide the minimal display support for their works, to one of the richest universities in the world? Having said this, we must certainly applaud Jim Mason and his community of supporters who looked after the Papuan artists with such care and hospitality. What I am interested in here, however, is something that James Clifford deferred comment on as at the time of his writing it was too early to consider. The issue was how the garden was ultimately to be owned and used (Clifford 1997:196).

When my wife and I finally visited the New Guinea Sculpture Garden, with James Clifford, in the summer of 2008, I found a well presented, cared for and seemingly permanent feature of the Palo Alto campus. While Clifford reminded me of a bit of his paper that I had almost forgotten, it seemed to me to be an almost perfect example of the successful contact zone. A project that directly supported indigenous artists by bringing them into direct and meaningful engagements with a diverse group of people on the other side of the world. A chance for them to speak for themselves and to demonstrate their artistic productions. For these works of art to be displayed for posterity in a permanent site on campus. What more do we want from a contact zone? Perhaps this is why so little has been said about this section of Clifford's paper – because it is so obvious a model, a model so often reproduced these days especially in museums.

However, while wandering about the Garden something that Clifford said, intentionally I think, struck me out of this complacent attitude. While wandering around the exhibited sculptures and reading the now permanent interpretations, Clifford said that he thought that the Papuan artists expected something more, more long term, out of the exchange. Though it took me some time for the significance of this simple statement to sink in, what I think Clifford was saying was that though we were looking at a perfect example of a contact zone, it was not the pleasant contact zone usually assumed – contact zone of equal reciprocity and mutual benefit.

Clifford was showing me, as he has shown us all over the years, that contact zones are not really sites of reciprocity. They are, despite the best efforts of people like Jim Mason, asymmetric spaces of appropriation. No matter how much we try to make the spaces accommodating, they remain sites where the Others come to perform for us, not with us. What we see in the creation and stabilisation of the Papuan Sculpture Garden, I think, was that like so many other collaborations scattered around the Palo Alto campus that also have complex hidden histories – sites that are also stabilized and naturalized for posterity into the campus landscape – there is little sign of the Papuan artists, but for the sculptures. Nor is there any sign that very much at all, but for the artists, went back to Papua New Guinea.

What we see in the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University is not just a contact zone that, ultimately, failed to live up to the Papuan artists' expectations. What we see is the conflict between two fundamentally different sets of assumptions about what the engagements were for. For the Papuan artists the expectations included sets of reciprocal obligations for the gifts of their time, effort and works that never materialized. Such engagements entail on-going obligations between people that are part of the agreement to come and help. For the people who participated and helped in Palo Alto over that year of 1994, it was a chance to engage with these talented artists, to speak with them and show them California culture, but mostly to promote them by permanently displaying their art.

It is foolish to argue that the Palo Altoans were wrong, or insensitive, or even naïve. Both sides in the bargain had culturally specific expectations that were not going to map onto each other very well. We could equally say that the Papuan sculptors were naïve about the artistic exchange they were engaging with – a naiveté that largely no longer exists amongst indigenous artists. The point I wish to make here is that although all contact zone engagements are incommensurable in this way, what matters here is that in an incommensurable context dominance wins. This is the real lesson of the contact zone.

Mary-Louise Pratt also tried to teach us this lesson when she revealed how contestation within the contact zone can be literally obliterated when her son's essay on "A grate adventchin" of a vaccine that would make school unnecessary received the usual, but utterly silent, gold star. Richard Miller's later critique of Pratt's essay neatly summarizes the program of silencing within the contact zone:

> For Pratt, the teacher's star labors to conceal a conflict in the classroom over what work is to be valued and why, presenting instead the image that everything is under control – students are writing and the teacher is evaluating. It is this other strategy for handling difficult material, namely ignoring the content and focusing only on the outward forms of obedient behavior, that leads Pratt to wonder about the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse in the classroom. With regard to Manuel's real classroom community, the answer to this question is clear: the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse is *no place at all*. (Miller 1994:390; emphasis added)

The role of autoethnography within the contact zone is not simply one of translation and transculturation, but is of an appeal. The autoethnographic within the contact zone offers "self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan [or authoritative institutions] modes of understanding. Autoethnographic works are often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speakers' own community. Their reception is thus highly indeterminate" (Pratt 1991:34).

However, as Manuel's effort to challenge the hegemony of the academy shows, the contact zone allows for, and even encourages, participation; it demands dialogue, it assumes collaboration (of sorts), but it is almost impossible to effect. By placing the contact zone within the academy, as it always is, especially when applied to the museum, we see how dialogue and collaboration is fore-grounded, but the ultimate suppression of oppositional discourse is always effected. A pragmatic agonism is provided for all, but only to the degree that it returns to, and reinforces, the academy.

A New Museum Age or Neocolonialism

> Museums are indeed very painful sites for Native peoples as they are intimately tied to the colonization process. (Lonetree 2006:632)

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> Why play the game of self-representation? Such visitors, their hosts, and impresarios are not free of colonial legacies of exoticism and neocolonial processes of commodification. Nor are they entirely confined by these repressive structures. … The historical possibilities of contact relations – negative and positive – need to be confronted. (Clifford 1997:200)

That museums were the premier colonial institutions – institutions that created the ordered representations that contained, objectified and reduced the colonized world for the paternalistic imperialism that characterised the 19th and early 20th centuries – is beyond dispute (Young 1990, 2001; Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Harrison 1997:45-47). However there persists a view of museums as post-colonial institutions that have managed to reconstruct themselves after the dissolution of the colonies in the later 20th century (Shelton 2000, 2001; Prasad 2003). This vision of museums – post-colonially – is represented in what has been called the new museology (Macdonald 2006). A museology that promotes education over research, engagement over doctrine, and multivocality over connoisseurship.

Dominant premises of this move to an open post-colonial role for museums are tied up with a later-20th century neo-liberalism and abstract post-modernism. The new museology is neo-liberal in the sense that it assumes, as a core premise, the open exchange of information and the open access to information. It is abstract post-modern in that it assumes a critical ambiguity to definitive interpretations and positions within the museum (Lonetree 2006:642).

The justification for these positionings is to redress the "colonial" museum's stance of universal typological calibration, where the object was "to speak for itself" within an exhibitional space that ordered its relation to a measure of civilization. Thus setting it in relation to the *necessary* programs of improvement, paternalistic governance and social utility that supported western style imperialism. As Susan Ashley has pointed out, the problem is that though,

> … there has been great hand-wringing over the new, post-colonial role for the museum and how it functions as a place of representation, socialization and commodification (Hein, 2000; Hallam & Street, 2000; Kary [sic. Karp] & Levine, 1991). Much has been made of how to ensure participation and inclusion with the aim of creating unbiased cultural representations and developing new, non-white, audiences (Sandell, 2002). But at their core museums retain two basic competencies left over from colonial times – they collect and they exhibit. (Ashley 2005:31)

They also educate – which is also a left over from colonial times, and a core goal of the new museology. Susan Ashley goes on to speculate as to what would happen when communities with non-Western ethnicity interact with the museum? Even speculating what would happen if collecting and exhibiting were rejected altogether (Ashley 2005:31)? However, I am interested here in what practices constitute the three left over colonial competences – collecting, exhibiting and educating. Of course what I am suggesting here, perhaps even asserting, is that on top of being "left over" colonial competences, these competences have adapted themselves to a neocolonial world (Nkrumah 1965, Marshall 1998, Yew 2002) rather than transcending it. So, rather than being mere "left overs," these are new platforms for a neocolonial positioning of the new museum in relation to the *ex*-colonial Other.

Of course a thorough examination would cover all of these issues in chapter and verse. They would explore all of the nuances of museum practice and current museum history. They would accommodate all of the potential objections that will be levied at such an audacious claim. But, then, this is the primary mode of defence of the centre against claims that it is centralised. The centre constantly generalises, constantly

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summarises, constantly standardises. This is the raison d'être of the centre, to calibrate by summary standardisation (Latour 1987, 1988; Law 2004; Pickering 1995). Yet, when the periphery challenges these summary tactics, claims for absolute justification pour fourth (Hemming and Rigney 2008). However, I will give some justification for my claims.

In *Culture: A Reformer's Science* Tony Bennett (1998) challenged what he saw as an overly optimistic view of "cross cultural dialogues" in Clifford's contact zones (Bennett 1998:212). For Bennett, following Foucault, the new inclusiveness of museums was merely another manifestation of the museum as an instrument of governmentality. Bennett wants to know whether, in fact, museums simply want to extend their *improving* message as far as they can into civil society (Bennett 1998:213)? For Bennett this "bottom-up", as opposed to "top-down" model of exhibition development and engagement is not much more than a subterfuge (Bennett 1998:213; see also Harrison 2005a; 2005b:31).

Hilden and Huhndorf (1999) go further and argue that there is little positive potential in such messages from museums. For them, the act of museums allowing source community voices, simply continues to silence the stories of violence and degradation that was the colonial past. Ami Lonetree would go even further and argue that: "Our survival, as many people have argued, is one of the greatest untold stories, and the specifics of this difficult and shameful history need to be told" (Lonetree 2006:640-641). Her argument is that postmodern abstractions permeate modern inclusive museum exhibitional design.

> We have long critiqued the elitism and insider nature of Western institutions. But by producing a museum that features exhibits that only curators or those from the academy engaged in postmodern theory can readily appreciate, have we created a new institution of elitism? In my opinion, the museum misses an important opportunity to educate because of its choice to present a blurred abstract message to dispel those stereotypes about Indian history and culture that have long predominated in American culture. (Lonetree 2006:642)

Certainly collaboration is meant to overcome this dilemma. Isn't the inclusion of not only source community voices, but actual consultation, meant to ensure that a meaningful co-narratives are generated (Clifford 2001; Cooke and McLean 2002; Peers and Brown 2003)? Perhaps. I am not going to argue that it is not the intention of the museum professionals to achieve a meaningful and inclusive co-narrative through these programs of consultation. On the contrary, it is my belief, and my experience, that in almost all cases museum professionals are absolutely sincere in their desire to find an inclusive narrative – to allow the source community a real partnership. However, I think that the concerns outlined above from Tony Bennett, Patricia Hilden and Sherry Huhndorf, Ami Lonetree and the earlier concerns of James Clifford expose a structurally neocolonial institution and profession.

Decolonizing the Museum

In mid-2008 I was working on a set of principles for the expansion of a project with my colleague Jim Enote, Director of the A:shiwi A:wan Museum & Heritage Center in Zuni, New Mexico. We were discussing the incorporation into the project the principles of the museum as contact zone. Not being familiar with the argument, Jim asked me to explain the details of what that meant. Two things that happened in that conversation were formative to the writing of this paper. First, I realized that in trying to explain to Jim what the museum as contact zone meant, my explanations were themselves somewhat confused and disjointed. I realized that my conception of the contact zone was full of holes and inconsistencies. Second, that when I had given Jim a somewhat

reasonable description of a contact zone, his reply was simply that the concept seemed quite "clinical" to him (Jim Enote, pers. comm).

Jim's response to my description worried me. Had he not understood what I meant by contact zone? Was my description somehow deficient? Was my own conception of the contact zone weak or ill informed? His comment caused me to look again at what I imagined the contact zone to be. I say "imagined" for that is what I later realized my conception to be – an imagined definition of the contact zone. I too had read Clifford's article, and the subsequent discussions of it, with the assumption in mind that the museum could, and should, be a dialogic space. That to give meaning and value to objects was to invite source community members *into* the museum to *add* their voices to the objects. That this accumulation was the whole point of significance for the museum, the object, the source communities and the public. I came to realize that this was a *clinical collaboration*, and that it was this *clinical collaboration* that Jim Enote was so perceptively referring to.

The now admittedly overused example of the encounter between the Tlingit delegation and the curators and staff of the Portland Museum of Art in 1989 is what has become the prototypic model of the museum as contact zone (Clifford 1997:188-193). It is prototypic because not only has it been appropriated as such (Smith and Jackson 2006), but it contains the ingredients of the neocolonial encounter: despite the different power-relations, and different intentions of the two groups, they come together in an enriching encounter of mutual respect and learning. The Tlingit get their voices attached to the objects of the Rasmussen Collection, and the Portland Museum of Art learn about the claims and priorities of the Tlingit. Or is this what happened at all?

I have argued that the Papuan Sculpture Garden at Stanford University is a far more prototypic example of the contact zone than the many examples of collaborative engagements. The ultimate power, in such cases, lies not only with the control of the objects and the funding regimes – the property and capital, but also with the power to stabilise and display (Geismar 2008:113). The brief summer of dialogue and symmetric performance at Stanford has now yielded to the forces of documentation. The Papuans, in fact all of the participants in that summer's events, are now trapped in documentation, in inscriptions, in the discourses of the Academy. The discourse produced, in the end, is not even one of autoethnography in the sense of Pratt's Guaman Poma or Clifford's Tlingit delegation in Portland. It is absorbed into the collections of the centre, of the metropole. It is calibrated against universal laws – international documentation standards, narrated within the idioms of the Academy, and displayed with all the resources of the centre. Thus, always, is the contact zone. An asymmetric space where the periphery comes to gain some small, momentary and strategic advantage, but where the centre ultimately gains.

This asymmetry is built, literally and figuratively, into our institutions (Chakrabarty 1992). They are determined by our funding regimes, by our proscribed professional practices, and in museums, by the very roles that we fulfil – collecting, documentation and display:

> … more often than not, as this new "museum age" of building and expansion unfolds, the existing museum infrastructure is being renewed along preexisting lines. The Western typology of museums and the art and artifact display paradigms it characteristically deploys are, in fact, being extended to communities and countries around the world that have had no previous museum tradition. … The hard evidence of its resilience and vitality is the billions of dollars being invested in museums, new and old, by governments and private individuals. (Phillips 2007:18)

Good intentions have little force against the power of this institutionalised assemblage. If we read Clifford's essay carefully, and those of Mary Louise Pratt as well, we find that we were warned against this. That both argue that the contact zone is not an innocent space, not one that we can easily turn to our bidding. The creation of dialogue does not easily, nor of itself, break down the neocolonial infrastructure:

> My account argues for a democratic politics that would challenge the hierarchical valuing of different places of crossing. It argues for a decentralization and circulation of collections in a multiplex public sphere, an expansion of the range of things that can happen in museums and museum-like settings. … A contact perspective argues for the local/global specificity of struggles and choices concerning inclusion, integrity, dialogue, translation, quality, and control. And it argues for a distribution of resources (media attention, public and private funding) that recognizes diverse audiences and multiplies centred histories of encounter. (Clifford 1997:214)

This is the account of the contact zone that museums today would embrace, and some have put into practice, at least in part.

Yet, Clifford warned us in the central sections of the essay that "Contact work in a museum thus goes beyond consultation and sensitivity, though these are very important. It becomes active collaboration and *a sharing of authority*" (Clifford 1997:210 [emphasis added]). He also tells us, on the same page, that the centre, the academy, is now being challenged by tribal museums and minority cultural centres. That "Differences of power, control, and design of budgets determined who would be the collectors and who the collected" (Clifford 1997:195). Due largely to frustrations with their engagements with existing museums (Lonetree 2006), or the complete insignificance of these institutions to the community (Mithlo 2004:753), indigenous museums and cultural centres are creating their own centres of collecting, performance and presentation.

This is what I see as the key problem with the contact zone. It is not so much that the contact zone is inherently asymmetric, that the contact zone is a site in and for the centre. This is easily subverted. It is not that collaboration in the museum is wrong, or should be abandoned, as some might think I am arguing. On the contrary, this is an important feature of the empowerment of communities whose patrimony museums hold. The key problem is one of practice. As Ruth Phillips (2007:18), Tony Bennett (1998), Ami Lonetree (2006), N. Mithlo (2004) and Susan Ashley (2005) all point out in their various ways it is that the new museum, the museum as contact zone, is and continues to be used as a means of masking far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations and biases.

[7,933 words]

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