Decolonization within the Museum

La « Décolonisation » et les musées

Lynn Maranda
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Lynn Maranda
Curator Emerita, Museum of Vancouver – Vancouver, Canada

Abstract

There are two realities which pose the greatest impediments to museum decolonization. These are: the very existence of the museum itself being a Western construct, and, the nature of the collections within. Since the last decades of the 20th century, museums with assemblages of anthropological materials have become highly contested spaces. There is a growing movement emanating from the descendants of the peoples from whom these materials originated for the decolonization of such museums. To this end, these museums are having to develop a way to address the dilemma in which they find themselves in order to map a route forward and effect a realignment with those for whom this means so much.

Keywords: museums, anthropology, decolonization, dilemma.

Résumé

La « Décolonisation » et les musées

Deux phénomènes constituent des obstacles majeurs à l’introduction de la décolonisation dans les musées : d’abord, les musées sont avant tout une création occidentale, ensuite la nature même des collections détenues par les musées. Depuis les dernières décennies du XXème siècle les musées ayant rassemblé des objets anthropologiques sont devenus des lieux de contestation. Des mouvements croissants, émanant des descendants des peuples de chez qui les objets sont originaires,
agissent pour la décolonisation dans ces musées. Pour atteindre cet objectif, les musées doivent élaborer une stratégie pour affronter le dilemme dans lequel ils se trouvent et qui leur permettrait, à nouveau, de se mettre en accord, avec ceux pour qui tiennent cette question particulièrement à cœur.

Mots-clé : musées, anthropologie, décolonisation, dilemme.

The questions to be addressed are: why are museums seen as colonial spaces and why has a state of museum decolonization not yet been achieved? While Indigenous peoples are always “knocking” on the museum’s door, museums are reluctant to reach out, to welcome, to share. What is behind all this and can a path forward be achieved?

The primary fact

The existence of the museum is, itself, a colonizing fact. The very structure and what it embodies is perhaps the epitome and certainly one of the most readily observable symbolic remnants from the age of “active” colonialism. Museums are a product of colonialization as they grew out of those Cabinets of Curiosities which were private assemblages of what were frequently classified as strange and unusual oddities often pillaged and brought back from foreign and exotic lands. Colonization and the “bring ‘em back alive” mentality that all too often underpinned the growth of such collections, up to and including the advent of the museum, has deep roots and became firmly entrenched in “Western” and “Western-leaning” societies around the world.

As a consequence, the ultimate reality of any decolonization achievement in this sphere would mean the entire physical destruction of museums and all for which they stand. As this is not likely to happen, what can be done to try to mitigate the over-bearing colonialization museums represent to so many, and especially to indigenous peoples worldwide? Another route, another mindset, another rethink, are required and this can only happen from within the museum itself and through the museum undertaking to transmit a new reality not only to itself, but also to its immediate community, to the world beyond, and even to the seats of national governance. Then, and only then, can museum become a standard-bearer for the decolonization of itself and for a societal realignment towards those who have been disenfranchised for so long.

The pyramid effect and its consequences

Based on a worldwide perspective, it could be said that situated at the top of the perceived museum hierarchy is the International Council of Museums
(ICOM) (a non-governmental organization which maintains formal relations with UNESCO – United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization). While ICOM does not involve itself in the politics or running of museums per se, it does take responsibility for providing a definition of “Museum”. For many countries and museums worldwide, even if they do not subscribe to or are members of ICOM, ICOM’s museum definition seemingly remains THE most referenced word on what a museum is. Both institutional and related political jurisdictions have incorporated this definition not only into their raison d’être, but also into their path forward. In addition, ICOM has also developed a formalized Code of Ethics to determine and to steer appropriate institutional and individual behaviours of and in museums, and again, these have become a foundation for museum and staff conduct.

Since these two documents have evolved into benchmarks for a global “museumness”, the standards they set tend to steer museums in compliance with their tenets and what these represent. To surmise that they do not have a relational effect on museum thought processes, on museum behaviour and on what and how museums communicate to and within their communities, would be an understatement. In this way, the trickle down effect is solidly in place and the consequences far reaching. How can museums shake off the veil of colonization when there are overarching impediments to even consider doing so?

Looking carefully at both the ICOM Museum Definition and at the Code of Ethics, what signs of a route to decolonization can be seen? In fact, there is so very little that can be interpreted from these documents to support such a stance. Even considering ICOM’s three official languages (English, French, and Spanish), it is an inescapable reality that all three are from nations formerly responsible for mass imperialism and colonization throughout the world.

Taking all of this into consideration, museums are left alone without stanchions on to which to hold or mentors to follow. Perhaps this is a good thing, since it avails museums of the opportunity to set their individual course in concert with their own internal circumstances and those of the communities they serve. Thus, we return to the only route forward, that being the one individual institution’s need to map out for themselves.

**Anthropology and the museum**

Anthropology’s contribution to the museum’s impediment towards decolonization has its roots much earlier than its coming of age as a scientific discipline.

From the 15th through the 18th centuries, a number of European countries launched a competitive “Age of Discovery”, and the building of bigger and better ships allowed for travel to and exploration of distant, hitherto “unknown” lands – that is, unknown to the countries from where the ships came. These forays into the “unknown” turned into highly competitive imperialistic races to claim territories for that nation under which flag they sailed. In Europe, this
resulted in national policies of colonialism and the race to hold onto newly “discovered” lands, which often led to confrontation. What these early explorers found was that many of the lands they “discovered” were already inhabited by Indigenous populations and it was at this point of contact that both culture change and subjugation began to take hold. Voyages of “exploration and discovery” returned home not only with cartography of the new territories, and drawings of landscape, of flora and fauna, of Indigenous peoples (their clothing, habitations, ceremonies, etc.), but also with sample collections of animal and plant species, live herbarium specimens, and material culture objects from the peoples with whom they came into contact – objects which inevitably made their way into museum collections. In this way, museums became inextricably linked to colonialization.

Following on the heels of waves of global imperialism and colonization by European powers, anthropology arose in the latter part of the 19th century and hit its stride as a science in the first half of the 20th century. Anthropologists undertook fieldwork wherever an Indigenous society or ancient site of former habitation could be located, with many often laying claim to a lifetime exclusivity of right-of-study. Such forays into Indigenous territories or as a result of excavations in the pursuit of knowledge resulted in an influx of material culture objects that ended up in museums. It is these objects, whether archaeological or ethnological in nature, from such sources worldwide that have formed important, well-documented holdings in museums today. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991, p. 387), “Ethnographic artifacts are objects of ethnography. They are artifacts created by ethnographers. Objects become ethnographic by virtue of being defined, segmented, detached, and carried away by ethnographers.” Thomas (1991, p. 184) goes one step further and lists “agents of colonialism” as “explorers, missionaries, planters, ethnologists, administrators, pioneers” with some having “far less impact than others”. The once popular image of the ethnographer “shifted from a sympathetic, authoritative observer” to the unflattering figure of “the ambitious social scientist making off with tribal lore and giving nothing in return” (Clifford, 1986, p. 9). And yes, museums have been complicit in this activity as well.

In “post-colonial” eras, “the relation of anthropology to colonialism/imperialism became for the first time, a burning issue for anthropologists” since “in the aftermath of political decolonization, the voices of national liberation rang louder” and “access to traditional fieldwork sites now in control of independent “new nations” became problematic” (Stocking, 1991, p. 3). The role of the anthropologist thus grew into a controversial issue and by 1970, “anthropology was sometimes spoken of as the ‘child’ or ‘daughter’ of western imperialism and a form of ‘scientific colonialism’” (Stocking, 1991, p. 3). In addition, anthropology was targeted for its insensitivity in dealing with issues of historical context and “the discipline’s relationship to colonialism and ... to neo-colonialism” was questioned (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 14). Further criticism came in relation to the “process of objectification and representational sleight of hand through
which a conventional ethnography comes to be produced” (Keesing, 1992, p. 19). (This is critical as museum anthropologists draw from known ethnographies for informational materials for, for example, exhibition texts.)

Museum anthropology tended to be ignored by academic anthropology until near the end of the 20th century when the museum boom, “with its accompanying objectification and politicization of culture, finds its counterpart in expanding social scientific interest in the musealization of culture” (Bouquet, 2001, p. 1). Issues, such as those of the “social relevance of museum exhibits, deconstructionist critiques, critiques of ethnocentric primitivism, authenticity issues, and the politically-charged implications of museum exhibits in contemporary society” followed (González, Nader & Ou, 2001, p. 111). Desmond (1999, pp. 37–38) observed that “the rise of anthropology and the beginnings of tourism as an organized industry coincide, with each a different dimension of the ethnographic gaze” and that “both practices emerged within, and supported, the mutually constitutive ideologies of modernism and primitivism.”

Nevertheless, the anthropologist working as a curator in a museum is not in a comfortable position – the field of study and face-to-face interaction with Indigenous populations does not take place in a “remote” location but rather where public scrutiny is an immediate reality. Museum anthropologists work with material culture and have come to distance themselves from the peoples and lifeways from which these objects originated. It is evident that there is an irrefutable, interrelated link between the museum and anthropology which has significantly contributed to calls for decolonization. In fact, there have been growing concerns about whether anthropological collections, be they in the realm of archaeology, ethnology or physical anthropology material culture and specimens, should remain in museums at all.

Even probing questions have arisen about the very future of ethnographic museums and whether these will continue to exist. In July 2013, as a culmination to a five-year Réseau International de Musées d’Ethnographie project funded by the European Union and involving ten major European ethnographic museums – the aim of which was to encourage ethnographic museums to redefine their priorities in response to an ever more globalizing and multicultural world – the Pitt Rivers Museum and Keble College at Oxford University held a conference to try to find answers to such questions as those which appeared in their Advance Conference Announcement: “What is the purpose of an ethnographic museum in the twenty-first century? Who are they for and what should they contain? Who has the right to own and represent the material culture of others?” These are, however, quite different issues from those for museums located close to indigenous populations where the immediacy of these matters would require their own distinct response in keeping with the demographics. There are two divides here that exist: “them over there” and “us over here”. Distance matters, as does circumstance, both of which produce a very different mindset and path towards resolution.
Perception

The museum has become a status symbol and is often perceived as a “temple”, an “elitist” enclave, and an icon of “excellence” with worldwide recognition, a place to learn about oneself or the lives of “others” through viewing their material culture. In fact, the public face of museums is, first and foremost, their exhibitions and these carry powerful messages in whatever manner museums dictate and provide as experiential encounters. Exhibitions are a “contested terrain” and the “struggle is not only over what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing” and ultimately, “the articulation of identity” and to this end, “exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and ‘other’” (Karp, 1991, p. 15).

Through this one public-relational activity, museums have become an isolated law unto themselves with those on the outside “looking in” and absorbing what they are “told” without questioning either veracity or contextualization. Museums, after all, are the “experts” in the production and dissemination of such knowledge and any thought of disinformation never enters the equation. In this way, exhibitions act as the fulcrum for whatever messages museums wish to broadcast.

Nevertheless, museums, especially those with anthropology collections, have become disputed spaces since the latter part of the 20th century. They are viewed as the products of “imperial and colonial constructions of knowledge, official displayers of cultures and cultural hierarchies” and “repositories of intensely desired objects” (Phillips, 2012, p. 73). Further, “the objects of cultural Others” tend to be appropriated primarily into two categories: “the artifact or ethnographic specimen and the work of art” (Phillips and Steiner, 1999, p. 3). Museums also recast objects of “meaning” into commodified showpieces mounted in display cases featuring the “other”, a pejorative term now in common use. Consequently, these museums have found themselves in a tricky situation and are increasingly being held to account for their position and even for their raison d’être.

Two highly criticized and contentious exhibitions, *The Spirit Sings* (1988) and *Into the Heart of Africa* (1989), and the fiascos that befell them due to museum missteps, still weigh heavily on the Canadian museum consciousness. These, coupled with such insensitivity and poor judgement as that displayed in a 2014 incident when the Seattle Art Museum wagered an item (a Nuxalk First Nations 1880s ceremonial mask) to lend to the Denver Art Museum if the Seattle Seahawks lost that year’s annual US Super Bowl game to the Denver Broncos, shows that there is a long way to go before decolonization can truly manifest in the museum sphere.

The quandary

Museums face what they perceive to be an uphill battle towards reaching an acceptable and workable resolution. While the very existence of the museum...
itself could be equated with an “overt colonialism”, what transpires within this structure still remains a form of “subtle colonialism” which is all-too-often manifested by an ingrained ongoing museum ethos and its consequential actions. Many observers see museums as “a colonizing space engaged in classification processes that define people” and think that museums “construct the ‘other’ to construct and justify the ‘self’” (Marstine, 2006, p. 14). Further, Ames (1992, p. 102) asks: “What happens when a museum attempts to ‘museumify’ living traditions?”

On another note, Pratt (1992, pp. 6–7) describes “contact zones” as “the space of colonial encounters” in which “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” but which usually involve “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” In keeping with this, Clifford (1997, p. 192) refers to museums as “contact zones” and when “museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – a power-charged set of exchanges of push and pull”.

True, museums are a symbol of colonialism and museums are here to stay, but the challenge is how to decolonize a product of colonization without removing all museum structures and their services from the scene. So, what to do? Where to start? How to move forward? As a starting point, the subject is being narrowed to the Canadian circumstance – the “us over here” museum perspective.

In Canada, immigrant (primarily European and now Asian) populations “share” the land with those Indigenous peoples (referred to as “First Nations”) who were here long before all of us. This view, however, is not held by the First Nations who see the immigrants as poachers on lands that do not belong to them but which were “stolen” from their ancestors through the actions of exploration, colonialization, and exploitation by European powers who claimed to have “discovered” these new lands. Nevertheless, such territories were not “discovered” by European colonizers, because the then extant inhabitants were already here and this term is offensive to First Nations sense of being. Rather, and more accurately, Europeans ventured to “explore” lands new to themselves. This action, however, perpetrated a “move in” and “take over” scenario, which resulted in an ingrained “conqueror” ethos and the attitude and action of superiority that went with it. This state of mind is still prevalent in museums.

Museums have developed their own attitudinal ethos based on rights of intrusion and ownership. Still not fully cognizant or accepting of their stewardship role, museums continue to hold fast to the control they exert over all in their domain, whether it be the collections they have amassed or the accompanying intellectual property. They hold onto the right of title and are supported in this by the laws of the land. They generate a perceived attitude of arrogance as evidenced, for example, through actions of “inclusion” and “exclusion”. Nevertheless, how to maintain the integrity of their collections, their curatorial purpose and, at the same time, address decolonization, has become a challenge
for those museums holding anthropological materials as they endeavour to find a path through a conflicting conundrum.

Museums have learned and accumulated knowledge based on science which they disseminate through exhibitions and programmes and this has gone uncontested until relatively recently. The impending loss of their traditional and perhaps all too comfortable position of power is very much at the root of the enigma which museums are having to address. First Nations cultures are rooted in oral traditions which are passed down through the generations. This, therefore, introduces a new perspective which museums perceive as being unscientific and which may very well contradict the hard evidence. Nevertheless, First Nations will no longer accept being shut out of this sphere of knowledge dissemination where their own cultures are concerned. The challenge for the museum, therefore, is how to convey scientific evidence in a format that is acceptable to First Nations peoples.

There will still remain, however, a tension between scholarly data and traditional knowledge that is passed on verbally. In spite of the perception that memory can be elusive, museums need to acknowledge differences and embrace multiple voices in all aspects of museum activity when presenting indigenous lifeways and thought. It also needs to be borne in mind that each First Nation is unique to itself and can, therefore, differ widely from all others.

A pathway

So, where to go from here? What has to transpire within museums to ensure a path towards “decolonization”? Can decolonization ever be achieved? These are tough and far-reaching questions that must be addressed if there is to be any resolution to the current circumstance.

To begin, museums need to irrevocably shed their past mindset and adopt a position of, and path towards, inclusion and sharing by letting go of their previous, ingrained rights of privilege. They need to be prepared to take a back seat even to their own perceived learned status which they believe is their right. They need to welcome new ideas, new perspectives, new ways of doing, new voices into their “sacred” halls of academic learning and rigid articulation to what they hold as sacred to themselves. They need to learn to share and to listen, to collaborate and to form partnerships. Breaking down these extant barriers will not be an easy route to take, but if decolonization is to be realized and museums with anthropological collections are to survive with these holdings still in place, these tasks are essential.

There is also a belief that “bona fide” cultures are “frozen” in time, often occupying an almost fanciful place in the past, and do not change even when visited. The view is that museums deal with a sense of purity, and not with the hybrid resulting from integration. All too often, museum exhibitions endorse this impression. Even though museums are a registry of what was, peoples cannot be forever held in the past, especially if they hope to co-exist with them in the “real
world”. Museums must learn to accept this and to also represent the cultural continuum. Over time, extant cultures have had to adapt to their surrounding milieu even with their inheritors maintaining an identity which is tied to that of their ancestors. Museums need to be reflective of “living” cultures, rather than just Indigenous cultures of the past. Recognizing and acknowledging the “cultural continuum” as a legitimate inclusion in its collections, exhibitions and programmes, is an important step for museums to take. To achieve this, there needs to be a shift in ideology to allow for contemporary thought and action whereby the museum discards its penchant for what it considers to be real or authentic cultures and accepts that cultures change. Museums need to recognize that the resultant hybrids are as diverse as the backgrounds from which they originated. Museums need to become what they have not yet imagined.

Museums are a product of the “age of discovery” and have been comfortable in that role. In fact, the museum’s approach to itself is a colonizing act and requires a change of mindset which needs to come down to such simple basic human values as “perception” and “attitude”. First Nations peoples will no longer accept being marginalized or shut out of the museum sphere. They now demand equal access to museum collections and the right to interpret these through their own eyes.

Since the mid-20th century, the political landscapes have been altered by “the cumulative effects of postwar decolonization – uneven and locally articulated, hemmed in by neocolonialism, but making space for a broad range of contestations and voices” (Clifford, 2013, p. 104). The question to be asked might very well be: “Does the growing popularity of collaborative exhibits signal a new era of social agency for museums” or have museum spaces become a place where “symbolic restitution is made for the injustices of the colonial era in lieu of more concrete forms of social, economic and political redress?” (Phillips, 2003, p. 158).

Clifford (2013, pp. 5–6) sees the last half-century as the “interaction of two linked historical energies: decolonization and globalization”; he states that neither process “is linear or guaranteed” or “can subsume the other” and that both “are contradictory and open ended”, and concludes that this is “an unfinished but irreversible project” (Clifford, 1986, p. 9). Clifford continues to say that cultures “do not hold still for their portraits” and that attempts to make them do so “always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship” (Clifford, 1986, p. 10).

In Canada, larger museums are now hiring First Nations peoples as curators and interpreters in an effort not only to right the wrongs of the past, but also to inform their visitorship of the valued knowledge Indigenous peoples bring to this public arena. This opportunity for museums to address cultural assimilations and the tangential or hybrid cultures that arise from competing ideas provides the museum with new ground to explore and adds an incredibly
important dynamic to the museum's role in the community. Sadly, however, not all is going well. For example, in February 2021, it was reported that the head of the Royal British Columbia Museum (one of the largest in Canada) was forced to step down amid an investigation following the resignation of the Head of their Indigenous Collections and Repatriation Department (and a member of the Haida First Nation), citing an internal culture of racism and discrimination. That this should happen in a museum of this stature will send efforts to decolonize museums back to the “starting blocks.”

Canadian Museums do have a course of action as outlined by the 1992 Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples, but this has not been fully embraced, is not legally binding and stands in contrast to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) which is in force in the United States. What the Task Force Report does recommend are steps which encompass “partnership” (Task Force, 1992, p. 4). This is a good starting point for museums regardless of whether or not they have hired First Nations curators and interpreters. Since museums are virtually an operational-centric law unto themselves and strive to maintain their position of authority in all that they do and plan to do, “partnership” is foreign to the museum ethos and needs to be initiated and embraced if not already present. Nevertheless, “partnership”, full and equal, is what it will take to begin to dissolve the yoke of colonialism felt by Indigenous peoples everywhere, not just in Canada. Partnership will require a putting aside of the museum’s long-held stance of superiority and its tight grip on that which has gone before. Partnership will require the opening up to other ideas and perspectives, to other ways of “seeing” and “doing”, and to other “voices”.

Ames (1999, pp. 41–42) recognizes that “ ‘Partnering’ and ‘collaboration’ are popular terms with museums these days, though they are used to describe many different arrangements and usually from the perspective of the museum itself”, but also admits that there are concerns about “potential risks to research opportunities, academic freedom, and curatorial prerogatives” – risks which cannot figure in the equation when heading towards decolonization.

Sharing museums as “keeping places” with Indigenous peoples would go a long way to decolonizing the extant imbalance. There is little doubt that closer interaction would benefit both demographics. In fact, why cannot a full and equal partnership be achieved whereby Indigenous peoples have not only a voice in, but also full control of all aspects of museum activity in presenting Indigenous lifeways and thought?

**A case in point**

Take for example, the venture into “partnership” by the Vancouver Museum when creating and mounting an exhibition on Coast Salish basketry. This museum sits squarely on the former Indian Reserve #6 (Sn?aqʷ) in a park near downtown Vancouver. The land was allotted to the Squamish Nation in
1887 and, in 1913, was illegally taken over by the provincial government. Those living on the Reserve were forcibly dislocated, put on a scow and towed to new reserve lands in North Vancouver and the Squamish Valley where these peoples reside today. The homes on IR6 were burned and the land was taken over by the Canadian Pacific Railway. Between 1913 and 1946, the Federal government permitted other parties to use the land, including Canadian armed forces during and after the Second World War. The land was eventually acquired by the City of Vancouver which was responsible for the building of the museum thereon (as the city’s major project to celebrate the 1967 Canadian Centennial) and which opened in October 1968. Beginning in 1977 and continuing well into 1999, legal action was taken by sḵwx̱ wú7mesh (Squamish) First Nations, with both the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) and the selílwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations (also inhabiting the lands within the Vancouver city catchment), filing counter claims in respect of the same action.

This situation being the reality for this museum, it “partnered” with all three First Nations to mount an exhibition. Throughout, the three First Nations were involved in all aspects of the process – choice of exhibition theme, application for grant monies, choice of objects for display (including seeing that important items which the museum did not have were either made by or borrowed from their First Nations), writing of texts and labels, working in the museum’s conservation lab to prepare objects for display, choice of display methodology, paint colours, text format and print, graphics inside of the exhibition hall, and any ambient embellishments such as sound. Once the exhibition opened in 2002, the three First Nations were also responsible for school and public programming. Each First Nation provided a curator and an administrative person to whom the curators reported. The role of the museum’s Curator of Anthropology was one of facilitator, attending all meetings with the curators, and serving as the liaison between the First Nations and the museum.

The partnership dynamic (which was not initiated by the museum) was particularly evident when the First Nations administration would not allow the museum to either hire the curators or pay them. Thus, when the monies were awarded to the museum by the government, those fiscal appropriations for the First Nations curators went directly from the museum to the respective First Nations. The museum administration was not happy with this arrangement, and this was, in fact, one of numerous cracks which developed in this “partnership”. There were others along the way as well which became ongoing irritants for the museum’s administration. These included numerous delays in the exhibition opening, the ongoing need for courtesies towards First Nations elders which included food and ceremony, ongoing conflicts among the three First Nations, and an opening ceremony in which the museum played almost no part at all. Such irritants would need to have been overcome and accepted by the museum to effect a truly full partnership with these First Nations peoples.

Before any such collaborative project begins, the museum will have little influence over the issue of control even though these undertakings may ori-
ginate from and occur on its premises. First Nations peoples will initiate Protocol Agreements (which state how the parties will work together), set the agenda and course of action, will direct what is said not only inside the museum but also what information is disseminated beyond its walls, what is to be displayed (objects, visuals, reconstructions) and how these are to be represented. In fact, anything and everything that impinges on any joint project, including the vetting of funding and other support sources, in which First Nations peoples are involved.

“Until museums do more than consult (often after the curatorial vision is firmly in place), until they bring a wider range of historical experiences and political agendas into the actual planning of exhibits and the control of museums collections, they will be perceived as merely paternalistic by people whose contact history with museums has been one of exclusion and condescension.” (Clifford, 1997, pp. 207–208)

Whatever the reasons, whether it is guilt over past wrongs or a willing compliance, the museum is being cornered into a secondary role. The loss of the traditional position it has had in the past, is a dilemma which museums now need to address.

The future

Museums need to face some hard realities. They serve many communities in their sphere of influence and if they are to stay relevant to and inclusive of an important element they need to accept that their anthropological holdings are not just objects to adorn their exhibition halls, but are “living” components of a people’s past through which they speak. It is a fact that the “movement towards self-determination among North American First Nations continues unabated” and these peoples are “asking that society recognize their interests in their own heritage, spiritual and well as material” (Ames, 1990, p. 158). It is also true that museums with anthropology collections “are places where competing claims to ownership, compensation, authority, and interpretation have to be negotiated on an almost daily basis” (Phillips, 2012, p. 73).

So far, there has been no mention herein of repatriation, a term that sends shivers through museums, although they are all fast becoming aware of what it means in a real sense and this is another difficult situation which museums are now having to face. While repatriation may be seen as a corollary to decolonization, it is not a given. Not all First Nations peoples want materials returned for a variety of reasons, such as the loss of knowledge of the appropriate ceremonial requirements or the lack of an ability to accommodate same, even though indigenous museums and cultural centres do exist.
Of particular concern are human osteological materials (“ancestor remains”) which museums have in their collections. The protocol of not exhibiting such materials in Canadian museum galleries has been the norm for decades, having been removed in response to a growing realization of the inappropriateness of their public display. Still, there are museums that are involved in physical anthropology pursuits and make use of such in their laboratories. Even though there are some First Nations that do not want such remains returned, there is, nevertheless, a growing demand that many museums are heeding and making concerted efforts to comply. Yet, Jivaro tsantsa and Egyptian mummies, for example, are still a source of public curiosity and there does remain a lingering reluctance to remove these from sight.

Museums, too, rapaciously built their anthropological collections throughout the early part of the 20th century, often in competition with each other. While some of these were amassed from the field under questionable circumstances, or obtained by stealth, or “purchased” from First Nations peoples, all are seen as “theft” perpetrated by museums. These also need to be addressed and serious thought given to their return en route to effecting museum decolonization. It certainly would go towards promoting equity in and bring some measure of resolution to the museum–First Nations struggle. Unquestionably, such an action would be a heavy loss to be borne by museums and it would seem that distance plays a part in effecting action.

For example, the 1904 removal of the Mowachaht Whaler’s Washing House Shrine from Yuquot on the west coast of Vancouver Island, a purchase negotiated by George Hunt (who, in the late 19th to early 20th century, had already acquired vast quantities of First Nations objects from the Pacific Northwest Coast for the American Museum of Natural History in New York) in collaboration with anthropologist, Franz Boas, has been a source of endless repatriation requests since the 1980s. On the other hand, an iconic large stone 3000-year-old carving known as the Sechelt Image, found in 1921 and subsequently sold to the museum in Vancouver in 1926, was returned to the Sechelt Nation in 2010. Further afield, in 2007 an Indigenous man from Mexico set up a small display in Stephansplatz, Vienna, depicting his people’s concern over the headdress of Montezuma, a ruler of the Aztec empire, believed to be in the collections of the Museum für Volkerkunde, and appealing to passers-by for its return.

Coda

Within the scope of this paper, the all too numerous colonialis-type “errors” certainly cannot be tabulated – there are simply too many. Suffice to say that these have existed, have had deleterious consequences, and still exist today. Regardless, it is the anthropological holdings in museums and what evolves from this circumstance that are the primary targets for critique when discussing decolonization.
Lonetree (2012, p. 1) begins her book with these sobering words: “Museums can be very painful sites for Native peoples, as they are intimately tied to the colonialization process”, but goes on to acknowledge (although it cannot be accepted as a pan-Indigenous statement) that museums “have changed significantly from the days when they were considered ‘ivory towers of exclusivity’“, and that Indigenous peoples are “actively involved in making museums more open and community relevant sites.” Nevertheless, she concludes that transforming museums into places that matter for Indigenous peoples means that decolonizing “tells hard truths”, “engages a collaborative methodology”, converts “sites of oppression to places that matter”, “goes beyond survivance” and means “sharing Indigenous knowledge” (Lonetree, 2012, pp. 168–175).

In the end, if “museums find that they are still trying to control a people’s heritage, influencing the perceptions of that heritage and setting conditional relationships with the Indigenous, then the transformation is still distant” (Branche, 1996, p. 125). This will certainly be the case if museums cannot reach a level of cultural pluralism with the Indigenous peoples with whom they are inescapably linked and this will be a loss for both demographics. While there are many impediments, there are still routes open towards ending colonization in museums and for museums to initiate an “us together” path forward.

Postscript

In June 2021, following the recent tragic discovery of the unmarked graves of 215 children on the land of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, an arrangement has been made between the order of nuns who staffed the school and the British Columbia Provincial Archives for the school records to be made accessible to First Nations communities. As the Archives falls under the responsibility of the Royal British Columbia Museum, and as access will be controlled by the Archives, this represents another associative activity which museums also need to address. With this and other similar atrocities being discovered elsewhere in Canada, decolonization, even at the museum level, appears to be extremely acute.

References


