“Changing up” the museum: cultural translation and decolonial politics

“Changer” le musée : traduction culturelle et politique décoloniale

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We can do something different. We can change up who we think should lead us, who should speak for us.

Wangechi Mutu

Good translation is demystifying. It manifests in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text.

Lawrence Venuti (1998, p. 11)

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Abstract

This paper argues that the dialectic of colonial / decolonial is both too comprehensive and too polarizing to be useful in the granular work needed to change up the deep structures of Western museological practice. It proposes that we think instead of the museum as a site of cultural translation that deploys approaches of “foreignization” and “thick translation” as theorized within the field of Translation Studies. The generative potentials of recognizing mistranslation and untranslatability are explored as well as the relationship of critical hybridity to the ongoing need for re-translations that respond to changing societal needs.

Keywords: Museums, Cultural translation, decolonial politics.

Résumé

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Cet article soutient que la dialectique coloniale/décoloniale est à la fois trop complète et trop polarisée pour être utile dans le travail granulaire nécessaire pour changer les structures profondes de la pratique muséologique occidentale. Elle propose de considérer le musée comme un site de traduction culturelle qui déploie des approches de «foreignization» et de «thick translation» telles que théorisées dans le domaine des études de traduction. Les potentiels génératifs de la reconnaissance de l’erreur de traduction et de l’intraduisibilité sont explorés, ainsi que la relation de l’hybridité critique avec le besoin permanent de retranslations qui répondent aux besoins sociétaux changeants.

Mots-clés : Musées, traduction culturelle, politique décoloniale.

* Museums have drawn me in since I was a child during the 1950s. Growing up near New York City, my first museum – the Metropolitan Museum of Art – was one of the most imposing. To climb up the wide steps and cross the threshold into the cool, expansive space of its Great Hall was to enter a place like no other. Normal human scale gave way, diminishing and uplifting adults and children alike. My mother and I walked down corridors lined with ancient statues, between ranks of cases filled with precious objects, and into galleries hung with colourful paintings in impossibly elaborate gold frames. The museum’s riches seemed both inexhaustible and arcane, tersely labelled by
anonymous and unlocatable authorities who, priestlike, guarded the museum’s mysteries and preserved its aura.

Ultimately, I suppose, this combination of attraction and impenetrability led me to art history, decoder of ancient inscriptions, sculptural conventions, and painted iconographies, and then to anthropology, translator of cultures. But it was with the emergence of critical museology during the last decades of the 20th century that scholars began to penetrate the aura of the museum itself. A compelling series of deconstructive analyses revealed the modern museum to be a space of ritual performance produced by highly specialized technologies of representation. They documented how Western societies have deployed these technologies to construct, narrate and display collective memory and history for a broad audience, empowering curators and donors imbued with the sponsors’ ideologies, values, and tastes to choose what things to preserve, how to classify them, what to say about them. Tony Bennett (1995), for example, explained how exhibition strategies serve the needs of democratic nation states to produce self-regulating citizens; Svetlana Alpers (1991) described the conditions of extreme visibility museums create to heighten and intensify our way of seeing; and Carol Duncan (1995) showed how particular architectures, regulations, and visitor paths orchestrate the museum visit as a ritual of social reproduction. Crossing the threshold into the Met’s Great Hall was, indeed, to enter a liminal, even a sacred space.

Walking along Fifth Avenue toward the Met’s main entrance six decades later, in 2019, the museum seemed largely unchanged – until the unexpected came into view. A set of imposing bronze figures had suddenly arrived to occupy niches built into the neoclassical façade that had remained empty for 117 years:2 The New Ones will free Us3 – four majestic Black women, their bodies ringed and draped in coils reminiscent of African styles of body decoration – is the work of Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu. The Met’s Modern and Contemporary Department chose her to undertake its first façade commission, initiating a series that invites artists to “create new works of art inspired by the collection, establishing a dialogue between the artist’s work, the collection, the space, and audiences.”4 For Mutu, the prominence of the site on the front of an institution whose classical traditions have been, as she puts it, “heavily guarded”, was an opportunity to redefine who these audiences are – in her words, to “change up who we used to represent”. She draws on the female caryatid figures that occur both in classical European architecture and

2. Mutu has said: “And in the way we installed them, they basically arrived overnight, as if to communicate something that hasn’t been allowed to be spoken.” https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2019/wangechi-mutu-the-new-ones-will-free-us, accessed 7 March 2021.
stools used by African kings in order to speak back to sculptural traditions that have positioned female images as structural supports. Rendering them as freestanding and powerful, she liberates them to intervene in both gendered and racialized hierarchies. Quintessentially intersectional, *The NewOnes shall Free Us* is fully in tune with feminist activism and the women’s movements of the past decade. Building on her long-standing consideration of the “relationship between power, culture, and representation,” Mutu’s *NewOnes* “bring word of new ideas and new perspectives.”

At the end of 2019 a second commissioned project appeared just inside the Met’s main entrance. It, too, draws on Western academic traditions in order to turn them in new directions. Cree artist Kent Monkman’s response to the first Great Hall commission is *mistikosiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, a diptych that adopts the monumental scale and figural conventions of history painting, the most prestigious of Western painting genres for more than three centuries. Like Mutu, Monkman “changes up” the gendered and racialized power relations this genre has long inscribed. His time-travelling, gender-fluid alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testikle, displaces the white male heroes celebrated in earlier history paintings to occupy the central position of leadership. In the first panel, *Welcoming the Newcomers*, we see her helping ashore a motley array of hapless arrivées in the Americas, rewriting the discovery narratives of explorers from Columbus to Cook. In the second, *Resurgence of the People*, we are in the present. Here Miss Chief occupies the place of George Washington in Emanuel Leutze’s 1851 *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a centrepiece of the Met’s American wing. We see her piloting a boat overloaded with Indigenous people, settlers, and refugees through the flood tides of a world engulfed by environmental crisis, massive human displacement, and growing threats of racial violence. In his performances, lectures and interviews Monkman leaves his viewers in no doubt about the targets of his historical revisionism; at the Met he provided visitors waiting in line for the coat check with a key that identifies the specific works in the Met’s collections of European and American painting and sculpture whose inaccuracies and stereotypes his re-paintings correct. “I think this is a turning point,” he says. “The Met is encouraging shared perspectives on its own history. We can decentre the conversation.”

I have used the word “occupy” advisedly in describing the action of these two commissioned interventions, for although revisionist works of art can claim space within the museum only as proxies for embodied acts of resistance, many museum visitors would have made the connection with the wave of real-time protests decolonization activists have been staging in New York and elsewhere in recent years. The protestors have demanded removals – of monuments from public space, of donors’ names from museum walls, of trustees from museum boards, and of collections through acts of restitution. But equally, they have

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demanded additions – of new areas of collecting and display, new audiences, and transfers of authority to curators and collaborators from under- or unre-presented communities. The intersectionality of both Mutu’s and Monkman’s works responds to the wide range of issues that are aggregated by the protesters under the umbrella of decolonization – systemic racism, gender biases, the treatment of refugees and migrants, Indigenous treaty rights, corporate amorality and greed, the environmental crisis.

Like “occupy”, Mutu’s use of the phrase “change up” has multiple resonances. In baseball, a “changeup” is “a slow pitch . . . thrown with the same motion as a fastball in order to deceive the batter.” If you are driving a car, to change up means changing into a lower gear to give your vehicle more power. Both definitions are apt. As in baseball, Mutu and Monkman might be said to deploy a kind of deception by cloaking their subversive messages in the familiar language of classical Western arts. And, like a car shifting into first gear, each powers up the rhetorical strategies and modes of art installation on which establishment museums have long relied to go bigger, better, and more imposing. The Cambridge dictionary online offers a still broader definition: “change up,” it says, means “to change something, especially in order to improve it,” as in the phrase, “if something’s not working, they change up.” The something that has not been working for 21st-century museums is the legacy of colonialism that continues to inform the ways they frame the world’s artistic and intellectual traditions according to Western hierarchies, classifications, genres, temporalities, and narratives. In an era that affirms the values of pluralism and Indigenous reconciliation, the organizers of this conference ask whether and how and for whom this modern Western tradition can be changed up?

I bring to these big questions the perspective of a Canadian settler trained in art history and anthropology. I also speak in the aftermath of 30 years of attempts to reform Canadian museums. This era was set in motion by a series of strong and forceful challenges to modern museological practices raised by Canadians of African and Indigenous descent. In an initial phase of decolonial negotiation Canadian museologists formed a Task Force on Museums and First Peoples and accepted the recommendations of its 1992 report which centre on new models of partnership and collaboration between museums and source communities. The efforts that followed have changed how Canadian

9. These controversies erupted around two major exhibitions, the 1988 The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples, at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary Alberta (see Phillips, 2011), and the 1989 Into the Heart of Africa, at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (see Butler, 2007).
10. The report, Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples, was funded by the Canadian Department of Communications (now the Canadian Department of Heri-
museums work with Indigenous and minority collections, communities, and Indigenous curators. Among the most recent examples are new long-term exhibitions organized by our two largest national museums to mark the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation in 2017. At the Canadian Museum of History the new history hall, which was closely overseen by an Indigenous advisory committee, opens with Indigenous origin stories. The installation is followed by an extensive account of Indigenous history in the lands that are now Canada during the millennia before the arrival of Europeans, and then by a settler history regularly punctuated by accounts of Indigenous experience. The history hall it replaces had presented, in contrast, an almost exclusively settler history of Canada. Similarly, the new Indigenous and Canadian galleries at the National Gallery of Canada, are introduced by contemporary works representing the Algonquin nations on whose unceded lands the gallery and the nation’s capital are located. The exhibits that follow interweave Indigenous and settler art histories.

In recent years, however, skepticism has been growing among Indigenous critics and museum professionals about the instrumentality of the “soft” acts of inclusion that museums can accomplish. And there is also a growing sense that the term “decolonization” itself has been stretched so wide that it risks losing focus – that, as in a game of telephone, over-repetition is evacuating it of meaning. The skeptics point to two kinds of problem. One recent body of critique is represented by political scientist Glen Coulthard, who argues in his 2014 book *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* that inclusion, collaboration, partnership, and affirmative action are assimilative and neo-colonial moves. In the same vein, in their widely cited article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor” Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) point to the need for real world acts of land return and political sovereignty rather than the symbolic forms of restitution that can be offered in the spaces of the museum.

A second body of critique raises even more challenging problems to effective decolonization in museums. Many Indigenous Studies scholars have argued that holistic and relational Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are inherently incompatible with the classifying and objectifying practices of the modern museum. As Margaret Kovach writes, for example, “Indigenous approaches to seeking knowledge are not of a Western worldview, a matter that colonialism (and its supporters) has long worked to confuse” (2009, p. 21). The modern museum has played a key role in engendering this “confusion” by sorting material culture and data collected from Indigenous peoples into separate repositories organized according to Western disciplinary formations. The disarticulations of the human, the animal, the cultural, and the technological that are embodied in the very structures of the museum system are, from
this perspective, incompatible with Indigenous principles of relationship and ethics of reciprocity. For Kovach and others, extractive Western practices of collecting and research have “left those they studied disenfranchised from the knowledge they shared” (2009, 26).

In the remainder of this article, I will argue that the dialectic of colonial / decolonial is both too comprehensive and too polarizing to be useful in the granular work needed to change up the deep structures of Western museological practice. In its place I propose that we think of the museum as a site of translation. Cross-cultural translation across both time and space has been at the core of the museum’s mandate since its beginnings. Museums lead us into the different countries of the past and open us to the endlessly diverse ways in which people have thought about their existence on this planet. Like interlingual translations, however, those of the museum can never be final or even “correct”. Historically contingent rather than perfectable, they have been and will continue to be subject to periodic processes of re-translation informed by epistemic changes in both the receiving and the source cultures. Objects collected and presented under the sign of curiosity, for example, were re-translated into scientific specimens and ethnographic artifacts, and then into works of primitive art. Today, these same entities are increasingly being re-translated as belongings, beings, and living embodiments of ancestral knowledge. Although these translations are always partial and incomplete, they are also inevitable, unavoidable, and indispensable. They create points of connection between us and our forebears and between us and others without which we are unmoored, impoverished, and put at risk – more than ever in this era of impending environmental implosion. In exploring the modalities of translation in the remainder of this article I will draw my examples largely from Canadian museological projects and Indigenous arts and histories I have had the opportunity to observe most closely. My hope, however, is that the lens of translation and the issues of process and impact my examples instantiate have broad applicability to global projects of decolonization.

Translation and Translation Studies

Translation, in its most common meaning, refers to equivalences between languages. Because languages are unique in their capacities to name, describe, and suggest the infinite variations of human experience, belief, and knowledge, it is axiomatic that perfect translations are impossible. Walter Benjamin’s famous 1923 essay “The Translator’s Task,” identifies the contradiction at the heart of the human urge to translate. “It is clear,” he writes, “that a translation, no matter how good, cannot have any significance for the original. Nevertheless,
it stands in the closest connection with the original by virtue of the latter’s translatability... It can be called a natural connection, and more precisely, a vital connection” (1923/2012, p. 76). This “vital connection” is, in my reading, the underlying fact of shared humanity, which Benjamin terms “convergence”. “This imagined, inner relationship among languages,” he continues, “is, however, a relationship of special convergence. It consists in the fact that languages are not alien to each other, but a priori, and independently of all historical connections, related to each other in what they want to say” (1923/2012, p. 77).

Over the centuries, translators have reflected on and theorized how to confront these intralingual conundrums. In the late 20th century, the field of Translation Studies, like museology and other humanities and social sciences, entered a reflexive and interdisciplinary phase informed by poststructuralist and postcolonial theory. This development, which Lawrence Venuti characterizes as “a renewed concern with the social effects of translation and their ethical and political consequence” (2012, p. 271), entailed a new awareness of the impact of colonial power relations and the violence done to the lives of colonized peoples through translational processes. Cultural translation, the new orientation that arose, has been defined by historians Peter Burke and Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia as “the adaptation of ideas and texts as they pass from one culture to another” (2007, p. 3). Because the items of visual and material culture museums hold and interpret are primary carriers of “ideas and texts”, the toolbox developed by cultural translation scholars has great potential for the work of decolonization.

A re-translation approach, furthermore, is applicable not only to the repositioning of individual works, but also to the ways in which the institution of the museum itself is translated across cultures. It invites us to think about the museum not only or even primarily as a bureaucratized bricks and mortar structure that offers resistance to change but, rather, as a technology – or a method, as anthropologist Nicholas Thomas (2010) puts it – that is malleable and available to an infinite number of applications and usages. In other words, although invented in the West and exported and imposed by colonial regimes, the museum has been embraced, adapted, and transformed to serve new ends – the subject in other words, of a translational process from Western source culture to non-Western receiving culture.

I will draw on insights from both Translation Studies and decolonial critique to parse key modalities of re-translation. My discussion does not pretend to be exhaustive but, rather, suggestive, and invites debate, critique and refinement. I will look at past histories and future potentialities of translation, beginning with different strategies open to translators, and the light they shed on historical processes of mis-translation and re-translation. Cultural translation also offers useful ways to think about the problem of mixing, hybridization and creolization highlighted in the ICOFOM theme statement. The problem of untranslatability remains – most often finessed, unaddressed, obscured, or silenced. I argue, however, that if we acknowledge and celebrate the untranslatable through a strategy of thick translation the untranslatable
can be transformed from an obstacle into an affirmation of the value of difference. Finally, we must confront the colonial history of language suppression, an—perhaps the—ultimate tragedy of silencing and erasure. How, I ask, might museums take up duties of compensation and reconciliation by supporting current projects of language renewal?

**Domestication / Foreignization**

Translators have long recognized that although all translation is assimilative, in the sense that it must restate the foreign text in terms comprehensible to the receiving audience, there are nevertheless choices to be made. As already noted, during the late 20th century, translation studies scholars re-theorized this process as not only technical and linguistic but also, inevitably, cultural and ideological. In his 1998 book *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* Venuti identified the two main strategies open to translators as “domestication” and “foreignization”. The domesticating operations of the colonial museum have been a major focus of postcolonial critique. They are accomplished both on a linguistic level, through the translation of terms and units of discourse that name and interpret individual items, and through the acts of decontextualization and recontextualization that occur as systems of classification and paradigms of installation change. All these forms of museological domestication sever the mask or the item of clothing from its interrelated aspects of expressive culture—food, fragrant plants, a musical performance, dance movements, ritual practices. Insertion into such categories as “religion”, “warfare”, “farming”, “transportation”, and “art” hacks into principles of relationality and holism with even greater violence.

The paradigm shifts that have occurred in Western museums during the past four centuries have already been noted, and they can be briefly illustrated by the successive ways in which wampums from northeastern North America have been exhibited. These woven bands of shell beads have been exchanged by Indigenous peoples and Europeans in key rituals of peace and treaty making for many centuries. Wampums first entered 17th-century European cabinets in the guise of curiosities; 19th- and 20th-century salvage ethnographers re-translated them as specimens of material culture and Indigenous technology, and by the mid-20th century they were being exhibited in museums as Native American art. The minimalist and reductive installations of non-Western arts we see most often today in galleries devoted to the arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas are lineal descendants of early 20th-century exhibitions of Primitive Art and still carry much of that colonial baggage. But equally, the recreations of imagined early- or pre-contact Indigenous contexts for wampums preserve the legacies of contemporaneous early-20th century scientific paradigms. The partiality of the meanings that come across in such recontextualizations exemplify what is lost in translation. Missed translations easily slide into mis-translations.

Indigenous curatorial work is not exempt from the inevitable partiality of retranslation whether they position wampums as historical artifacts equiva-
lent to written European treaties, as in *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations*, shown at the National Museum of the American Indian from 2014–2021, or as a work of art, as Mohawk artist Skawennati did in an installation that accompanied *Teiakwanahstahsonehhrha’ / We Extend the Rafters* included in the National Gallery of Canada’s *Àbadakone / Continuous Fire / Feu Continuel* (2019–2020). Both are also domestications, placed in museum settings to represent a genre that has continued to be activated by the living performative and ritual traditions that give it primary meaning.

Cultural translation also works through the formation of canons, a process that was brought home to me at the very beginning of my doctoral research in Sierra Leone on Mende women’s masquerades. In Western museums the Mende are commonly – and usually exclusively – represented by the head pieces of *sowei* masquerades performed by members of the women’s Sande Society. Mende people I consulted found this puzzling, because their most important and powerful masquerades are the *goboi* and *gbini* representing the men’s society and chiefly power (Phillips, 1995). Western museums have privileged the *sowei* because it is an idealized anthropomorphic image carved of wood and therefore comprehensible within the hierarchies of subject matter and materials associated with Western sculptural traditions. The men’s masks, in contrast, are made of leather, basketry, cloth, cowrie shells, and other materials associated with craft in the Western art world. During the late 20th century, furthermore, this female-controlled masquerade tradition was celebrated by second-wave feminists as evidence of a history of female empowerment in Africa that supported their ideals. To represent Mende gender relations in this way, however, mis-translates the complex negotiations of gender and power that occur through masquerade performances – as well as the impact of colonialism on Mende gender politics. This small case study bears out Venuti’s remark that “translation patterns that come to be fairly established fix stereotypes for foreign cultures, excluding values, debates, and conflicts that don’t appear to serve domestic agendas” (1998, p. 67).

Venuti has argued for the value of foreignization in rectifying hegemonic histories of translation. “A translator,” he wrote, “can choose to redirect the ethnocentric movement of translation so as to decenter the domestic terms that a translation project must inescapably utilize. This is an ethics of difference that can change the domestic culture” (1998, 82). Other cultural translation theorists have further developed this approach, advocating for the preservation of original linguistic forms rather than naturalizing foreign syntaxes, lexicons, and expressive modes by finding idiomatic English approximations – even, or especially, when the resulting translations are disharmonious, unexpected or awkward. For Gayatri Spivak (1992/2012), a literalness in translation that does *not* achieve an idiomatic currency is preferable to what she calls ‘social realism’ as a way of conveying the actuality of cultural – and especially gendered – difference. As Venuti has succinctly put it, “Good translation is demystifying; it manifests in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text” (1998, 11).
In his 1993 essay “Thick Translation” Kwame Anthony Appiah has offered a philosophically rigorous consideration of the translational challenges that arose for him in late 20th-century America. The example around which he builds his argument - Akan proverbs - is particularly apt for this discussion because of the canonical status of Ashanti gold weights as African art and their tight iconographic connections to Akan proverbs. To translate a proverb, Appiah shows, requires not just the simple identification of unfamiliar items and place names but also an understanding of the unvoiced mutual knowledge and expectations shared by speaker and auditor in the source community. “Translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” he writes, “is eminently worth doing. I have called this ‘thick translation’” (1993/2012, p. 341).

For Appiah, as a university teacher, useful translations must be adapted to the social context and needs of his students. “A thick description of the context of literary production,” he writes, “meets the need to challenge ourselves and our students to . . . undertake the harder project of a genuinely informed respect for others,” and “to face up to difference” (1993/2012, p. 341). It must respond to embedded contexts of racism and sexism by developing “views of the world elsewhere that respect more deeply the autonomy of the Other” (1993/2012, p. 341). He also stresses the need to affirm continuities with the past that validate the authenticity of contemporary practices and “challenge directly the assumption of the cultural superiority of the West by undermining the aestheticized conceptions of value that it presupposes” (1993/2012, p. 342). Appiah wrote these words in 1993. It is hard not to be discouraged that Wangechi Mutu found herself responding to the same issues two decades later. The call for thick translation in the museum has only become more urgent.

**Museology and foreignization**

For museums engaging with decolonization, the foreignization approach has the potential to create a kind of Brechtian estrangement that usefully disrupts the appropriations and assimilations of non-Western – and also earlier Western – objects. In the theatre, Brecht’s goal was to prevent audiences from experiencing a subconscious sense of emotional identification with difference and to develop instead a conscious and intellectual understanding and respect. When London’s Horniman Museum reinstalled its African ethnographic collections 25 years ago it innovated exactly this kind of estrangement. In place of elegant museum casework, curator Anthony Shelton (2000/2003) worked with architects to create a jarring design that would disrupt the harmony of the vaulted neo-classical late-19th century building in order to suggest the out-of-placeness of the items on display. Cases were positioned out of parallel and the Benin brasses purchased from collections looted by the British army in 1897 were exhibited in cases that resembled locked safes to emphasize their captive status. Foreignization was also achieved more recently when Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum recreated an early-20th century diorama of Mohawk life in a
frozen ethnographic past; Mohawk consultants placed a video camera, electric drill and cell phone in the hands of mannequins clad in 19th-century clothing.

Thick translation offers another avenue to foreignization. Returning to my example of Mende masquerades, it would mandate exhibitions that privilege the Mende hierarchy of power and value, thus estranging Western aesthetic criteria and the patina of old wood. In such an exhibition, as in Appiah’s discussion of Akan proverbs, texts and videos would account for the ways in which these masquerades negotiate ambivalent distributions of power across genders as well as the complications introduced by colonial constructs of gender. As in my wampum example, these changes would, however, remain re-translations, since their presentation within the museum would still frame them in terms of Western epistemologies, as examples of “art”, “culture”, or “history”.

**Mixing, mimicry, and colonial translation**

It is often stated that no words for the modern Western constructs of art, history, and culture are to be found in the lexicons of Indigenous languages – and it must, of course, be added that the meanings of these terms in the West have also changed radically across the centuries. The statement, however, ignores the generative nature of translation as such constructs travelled across time and space, through not only the impositions of colonial regimes, but also the multilingualism and cosmopolitanism of colonized peoples (Clifford, 1997). Interlingual translation is intercultural, dynamic rather than stable. For Benjamin, “established words also have their post-maturation. What might have been the tendency of an author’s poetic language in his own time may later be exhausted, and immanent tendencies may arise anew out of the formed work” (1923/2012, p. 77). For Bella Brodski, translation always entails “the transporting of texts from one historical context to another, and the tracking of the migration of meanings from one cultural space to another” (2007, p. 4). For Appiah: “A translation aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way another text matters to another…. it is part of our understanding of literary judgment, that there can always be new readings, new things that matter about a text, new reasons for caring about new properties” (1993/2012, p. 339).

Translations, in other words, layer, interact, and generate new and hybrid meanings. While they draw on the terms and concepts available within the source and receiving communities at a given time, they also make new terms available to both parties, altering the array of concepts that may be used in successive projects of translation. The global currency of the Western construct of “art”, and the exchanges and syncretizations engendered by modernist primitivism are outstanding examples of this phenomenon, as illustrated by the hybrid styles developed by Arrente artist Albert Namatjira and settler artist Margaret Preston in Australia during the mid-20th century. In this context, too, museums today take directly instrumental roles when, in their efforts to further decolonization, they translate exhibition texts and publications into
Indigenous languages and find ways to articulate aesthetic terms for which no words previously existed (Naokwegijig-Corbiere, 2008).

The historical processes of mixing, hybridity, syncretism, and creolization that have been produced through colonialism have, of course, been the subject of extensive analysis and theorization. Like translation itself, modes of mixing are historically contingent and produced by choices and strategies available to subjects. The two recent artistic interventions I discussed at the beginning of this article illustrate such choices. Both Wangechi Mutu and Kent Monkman responded to the Met’s collections and traditions by appropriating styles and genres whose familiarity make their gestures of turning and inversion particularly effective. Rather than rejecting classical and academic vocabularies, they affirmed their own interests in these artistic traditions and claimed them as a shared heritage. Both used their commissions as opportunities for re-translation through gestures of correction, inclusion and decentering.

Although both Mutu and Monkman rely on strategies of domestication rather than foreignization, each works with different calibrations of hybridity. Mutu has been best known for pastiched, fragmented, and surreal collages that invoke the hybridity of the cyborg, the monstrous, and the conflicted. In the NewOnes, in contrast, she combines African and European traditions to create a stable, harmonious whole in which internal contradictions appear resolved. For his part, Monkman’s work has been characterized by its masterful use of parody. As an icon of high camp and homoeroticism Miss Chief has embodied the spirit of colonial mimicry defined by Homi Bhabha. The “menace of mimicry” Bhabha writes, “is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (1994, p. 88). In mistikosiwak, however, Monkman extends his parodic power by endowing Miss Chief with a new gravitas that contrasts with her previous persona.

**Untranslatability and thick-translation**

Such projects affirm and celebrate a position of critical hybridity, but they are also cognizant of the dimensions of trauma and irreparable loss that must be confronted in the moment of decolonization. The elephant in the room also remains, for we do not yet know if or how the museums, in their modern Western forms, can assume responsibility for histories of extreme oppression in which they have been directly implicated, or address adequately the epistemological and ontological differences of Indigenous traditions. Here too, language is key, as Margaret Kovach has argued: “Indigenous knowledges have a fluidity and motion that is manifested in the distinctive structure of tribal languages . . . from this perspective alone Western research and Indigenous inquiry can walk together only so far” (2009, p. 30). For her, foregrounding the fundamental untranslatability of language is a first step. “In tribal epistemologies and Indigenous research frameworks one must first assert the interrelationship between Indigenous language structure and worldview, and then the manner in which colonialism has interfered with this dynamic” (2009, p.
59). As Burke comments, “Something is always ‘lost in translation’. However, the close examination of what is lost is one of the most effective ways of identifying differences between cultures” (2007, p. 38). The untranslatable emerges from such analyses as both a loss demanding the effort of recovery and the recognition of difference as elusive as it is precious. For both challenges, the collaborative models museums have been developing, which engage members of source communities as authoritative voices in interpretation, are the vital means of respecting and honouring the untranslatable.

The silencing and erasure of Indigenous languages was the gravest harm inflicted by the campaign of cultural genocide waged by colonial regimes. Here the museum also has a role to play. Not only are anthropological museums repositories of the language research conducted by salvage anthropologists, but they also preserve items of art and material culture that have provided stimuli to the recovery of Indigenous discourse and knowledge – as the Smithsonian’s Recovering Voices project demonstrates.12 In a recent series of works, Cree artist Joi T. Arcand has challenged museum audiences with the difficulties of both untranslatability and recovery. Her site-specific installations place Cree syllabics on floors and staircases that lead us into museums. “ekawiya akayasimo” was installed in the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 2017, but no translation was included in the labels placed nearby. As Arcand has said “Why should I make it easy for anybody?” Instead she placed the translation – “Don’t speak English” – in the elevator. Her explanation – “I always say, if you want the easy way, you take the elevator” – is a comment on settler feelings of entitlement as well as on the hard work required of Indigenous people in the recovery of their languages (as cited in Hampton, 2018). In a subsequent installation, “ōtē nikānōnk”, Arcand led visitors up the ceremonial ramp into the National Gallery of Canada’s Great Hall and the entrance to Abadakone | Continuous Fire | Feu Continuel, its 2019 exhibition of international contemporary Indigenous art. In this project the artist left the Cree title and floor text untranslated, requiring visitors to walk over the words without understanding what they were trampling underfoot.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have urged that we think of museum decolonization as an ongoing project of cultural translation, rather than framing it in polarizing terms of inclusion and exclusion. I do this not to avoid necessary confrontations with the abuses of power and destruction wrought by centuries of colonial rule, but in order to understand our own contingent historicity, on the one hand, and, on the other, to encourage productive processes of dialogue and collaboration. As I have argued, such an approach asks that we attend to past mis-translations in order to engage in projects of re-translation defined by

contemporary needs. It also requires that we acknowledge and position the untranslatable as a valued locus of cultural difference. My larger argument is directly parallel. Just as Mutu and Monkman claim traditions of Western painting, sculpture, and museums as their own – although demanding critical transformations and redirections – so too have Indigenous and non-Western societies appropriated the technologies and mechanisms of the museum itself for their own purposes.

Museums have been in the business of cultural translation throughout their long histories. They can be valuable partners in the process of decolonization because they can move hearts and minds to undertake this work on political, economic and social levels. In the complex societies in which we all live we have no choice but to confront together the enormous problems of human displacement, radical inequality, and environmental crisis. Because none of us can retreat from these hard realities we will need all the channels of translation we can access in order to join forces. “More than ever,” Brodzki writes, “translation is now understood to be a politics as well as a poetics, an ethics as well as an aesthetics [that] underwrite[s] all cultural transactions from the most benign to the most venal” (2007, p. 1). Unlike the dialectic of colonization/decolonization, the notion of translation is fluid. It is not a toggle switch. It does not imply an end point or a finish line, only our commitment to the ongoing work of re-translation.

References


