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Coming to One's Senses: Decolonising Artefacts at the Museum of Anthropology

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Abstract

My paper is concerned with decolonising contemporary museological practice, specifically in relation to ethnographic collections at the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver. I propose that display practices can be reformed through Indigenous collaboration with artefacts and visitors critically engaging with their display. I recognise that decolonisation must happen on a structural basis with institutions revoking their authority to Indigenous groups. Reclaiming this power grants the autonomy to decide how their collections are displayed and represented. I also explore ways for visitors to decolonise the space introspectively, by becoming critically aware of their own colonial gaze – how they perceive, critique and analyse museum spaces.

Introduction

I feel my breath catch in my throat as the scene unfolds in front of me. As if in slow motion, I watch his hand stretch out. The museum visitor, clad in beige shorts, socks and sandals, a camera swinging around his neck, slowly extends his arm. He firmly, and deliberately, leans against a massive twenty-foot totem pole. He smiles jubilantly and raises his free hand into a jaunty "thumbs up". His wife raises her own camera and snaps a photo nonchalantly.

I am watching this action in the Great Hall at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), Vancouver. It is an expansive room, light and airy with thirty-foot ceilings. Structured in the style of a First Nations long-house, its concrete beams form a tall, square glass wall. It reminds me somewhat of a chapel, quiet and sun-soaked. I could see little flecks of dust waltzing slowly through the air.

Figure 1: Exterior of MOA's long-house style Great Hall. Photograph by author.

I feel deeply unsettled by this interaction but it took me a moment to decide why. I decide the physical act of leaning against a totem pole was disrespectful. As if it was an old post, or a wall, he acted as if it were an object. It was most definitely not an object, but an artefact. This distinction carries many weighted connotations of preciousness, fragility, rarity and sacredness, but most importantly, it becomes "untouchable" (Classen and Howes, 2006). Tom, a fellow volunteer within MOA's Archaeology School's programme, even called artefacts "belongings". What had made my blood really run cold was that *he had touched it.* A notable museum *faux-pas*, it felt almost criminal. I expected the shrill screech of a security guard, or at least an alarm, but neither happened. I could hear imaginary ones ringing piercingly in my head.

Unaware of its sanctity, his actions were impertinent. "They are alive!" Anne, an Indigenous curator had explained to me before. "They are inherently spiritual and dynamic, alive and breathing," she said, breathless herself. She explained how totem poles are meant to disintegrate into the ground, returning to the Earth naturally, to be reunited with the spirits of nature. It allowed them to grow again: "an endless cycle of regeneration and birth". It seemed strange and counter-intuitive to house the totem poles inside. I understood it was for protection and preservation. However, I did not understand the rhetoric of preserving something that was not meant to be preserved.

My research considers the moral and ethical questions relating to the way Indigenous artefacts are encountered in museums. I ask whether it is appropriate to display and represent spiritual artefacts, masks and ceremonies that are not for non-Indigenous people to see. I explore whether it is intrusive to let individuals create meanings in places and things that do not belong to them. Is this connection an extension of the colonial project, intruding in places that are not our own? Often this is justified for educative purposes as it produces knowledge, empathy and understanding. This calls into question the ownership of this knowledge. Is it right for a predominately White institution to control First Nation representations?

Figure 2: Another couple poses in the Great Hall, MOA. Photograph by author.

Early anthropological and museological collection practices emerged from colonial discourse. These influenced modes of collection, display and museum practice. Clifford (1988) shows that 18th century anthropology displayed scientific, naturalist modes of collection. Treating cultures as "complex wholes" (Tyler, 1871 in Clifford, 1988: 230) meant objects were considered as specimens to show "systemic categories" (Clifford, 1988: 227). These typologies – such as food, clothing, weaponary – were used to show different stages of development or "evolution" (Clifford, 1988: 227). Context and meanings behind artefacts were deemed unnecessary, which justified passive encounters through sight. This is due to sight's association

with reason, evidence and hard proof (Classen and Howes, 2006). Rendering any other sensory context unnecessary meant merely noticing aesthetic value. Effectively, Indigenous artefacts become "colonized by the gaze" (2006: 200).

As relativist anthropology emerged in the 19th century, classification changed to show different cultures as "ethnographic presents" (Clifford, 1988: 228). These claimed to represent present-day and, therefore, "authentic" contexts of artefacts. Boasian relativism aimed to reflect a multidimensionality of humanity, which portrayed ethnographic artefacts in more holistic contexts (Clifford, 1988). Despite this progression, Clifford (1988) argues that systems of collecting cannot ever appropriately separate cultures into distinct and static taxonomies. As cultures and their representations are intimately dynamic and fluid, it is contentious whether any system of classification will be sufficient. As long as museums display things, artefacts will endure classification, their contexts manipulated and re-represented.

Developing a post-colonial museum means that artefacts must be displayed in ways that are meaningful and respectful to Indigenous values, beliefs and cosmologies. Representations and curatorship must seek to give precedence to Indigenous voices and worldviews. Enabling this progression requires a high-degree of Indigenous collaboration within curatorial decisions. By creating a dialogue, Indigenous identities become "speaking subjects" (Ames, 1992: 6). Establishing this "reoriented point of view" (Duffek 1991: 20 in Ames, 1992: 6) creates inclusive spaces where multiple voices dismantle existing hegemonic, colonial ideologies. Phillips (2003: 159) argues that achieving a "fully collaborative approach" allows Indigenous peoples to reclaim their own artefacts, histories and most importantly, their own representations.

Largely, MOA attempts to facilitate these collaborative approaches. However, whether this is sufficient is contentious. Built itself on traditional, ancestral and unceded Musqueum territories, MOA emerged from colonial acquisition. The land was claimed by the Crown under public ownership in 1871 when British Columbia became part of what is today Canada (Shelton, 2007: 391). However, this land was never claimed or covered by a treaty (O'Bonsawin, 2010: 150). Land not covered by a treaty is described as unceded territory and can continue to have aspects of Aboriginal title in force (O'Bonsawin, 2010). Thus, MOA resides on unlawful land while it displays, controls and owns First Nation artefacts and

representations. This continued legacy of colonialism is perpetuated through MOA and other North-West Canadian hegemonic institutions: "it exists in the very foundations…and the imaginations that fuel their development and maintenance" (Todd, 1994: 303 in Shelton, 2007: 393).

This paper shows the different ways First Nation artefacts are encountered within MOA. I argue that MOA attempts to decolonise the museum sphere by shaping how visitors encounter artefacts. This is enabled through culturally-appropriate display choices and through systems of Visible Storage as seen in MOA's Multiversity Galleries (MVG). Here artefacts are deliberately "decontextualised" to remove prescribed representations. Further, I argue that the politics of display and curation attempts to decolonise museum spaces through Indigenous collaboration within the MVG.

This paper draws on six weeks of fieldwork within MOA's School's programme and "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) in the MVG. This was supplemented through "go along" interviews, where I would interview curators as we walked through the MVG, allowing me to understand curatorial display choices and individual artefact biographies and histories. I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine individuals, including curators of the MVG, tour guides, museology professors, senior conservators, and volunteers from the handling sessions. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect my informants' privacy.

Encountering the Multiversity Galleries

A silence fills the gallery space at MOA, with a faint sound of a generator humming in the background. It is an awkward stillness and I can feel myself cringe. I am "go along" interviewing one of the curators of the Multiversity Galleries (MVG). A museum visitor appears and interrupts her mid-speech: "Are we allowed to open these?" he barks, pointing at a drawer underneath the case. He is pointing to one of hundreds of drawers where the majority of artefacts are kept in the MVG. There are hundreds of drawers in the MVG which hold thousands of items not displayed in cases. Some visitors do not realise they can be accessed. This is disappointing as it removes more than half of the artefacts from their reach.

Sally stops and mock sighs. A pause. "Yes!" she cries, enthusiastically and a little too loud. "Yes! Absolutely!" Her exasperation is hidden by her enthusiasm: "Open them all up! Have fun! There's 500 of them!" She laughs, but I can see why it may feel upsetting.

After the visitor leaves, we are quiet for another moment, alone with our thoughts. "See, that's another issue. If you put 'Open me' on one, it would imply you can't open them all. Then you can't put 'Open me' on them all because... Well, that just looks crazy."

The MVG is dimly lit (to protect artefacts) and extremely quiet. It features 11-foot tall glass cases along every wall, dividing sections of the room into corridors. Each section is assigned to an Indigenous group. The MVG is not strictly an exhibit, but a Visible Storage facility which displays over 16,000 Indigenous artefacts. This is when "collections are systematically presented in high density arrangements that lack interpretative labels but include access to the information available on each object" (Thistle, 1994: 207 in Dawes, 2016: 16). The layout is organised like a world map, with the North-West Coast collections on the left-hand side entrance. Maze-like, it is seemingly endless. The shelves are madly crammed with artefacts to a dizzying effect. I turn the corner and I am met with a giant five-foot Buddha statue. I turn again to a case filled with hundreds of Kwakwaka'wakw masks. I feel a hundred pairs of eyes glaring at me. As a researcher, this is even more unsettling. The analytical part of my mind is in overdrive, constantly unpicking and assessing all these display choices at once. I am sticking mental post-it notes all over the cases, papered so thickly that I can barely see underneath. It feels almost suffocating. I wonder if the artefacts feel this way too, confined in their upright glass coffins.

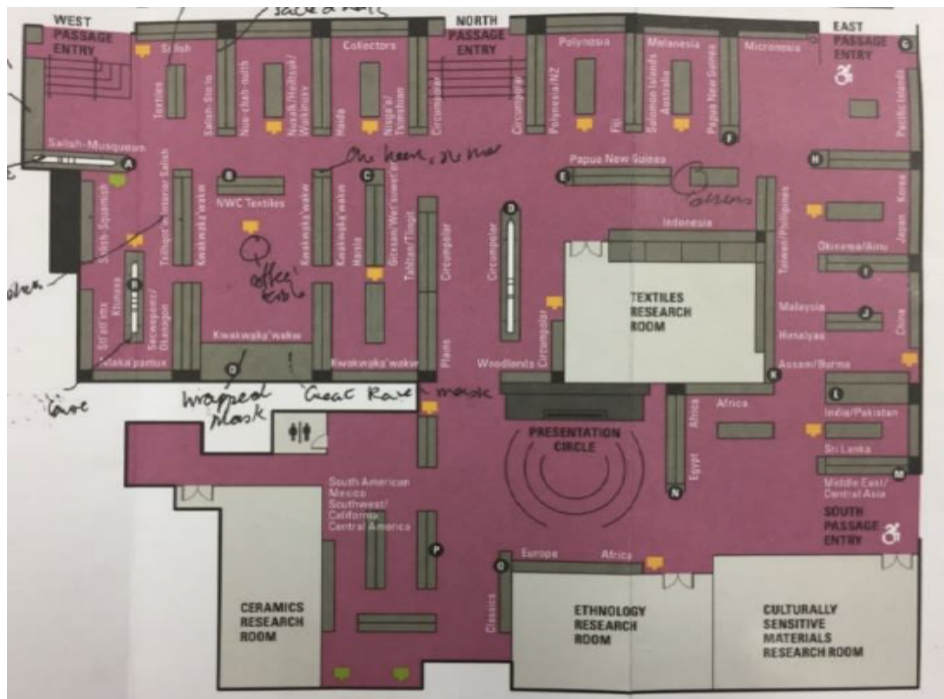*Figure 3: Kwakwaka'wakw masks. Photograph by author.*

Figure 4: Floor plan of the MVG, MOA.

Outwardly, the MVG operates as a occularcentric depository where interpretation is based on sight. Artefacts are contained in glass cases, some accompanied with brief, didactic labels. Paris and Mercer (2002: 401) argue this encourages "passive reception" which removes the "thingyness of objects" (Dudley, 2012: 1). Their meaning is obscured as interpretation is based on limited text on labels, which creates a distance between the visitor and the thing. Having

the artefact objectified this way, with its context removed, makes it harder for visitors to procure emotional or affective responses. What chance is there for meaningful encounters when artefacts are contained in such abundance?

However, this interpretation is merely superficial. I argue that Indigenous presence within curation can justify MVG's politics of display by forming inconspicuous ways to critically engage visitors. This is claimed through "Mobius museology" practices (Kramer, 2015) where Indigenous communities operate and collaborate simultaneously alongside MOA curators. I argue that the MVG's philosophy, alongside its ability to offer visitors a choice about how to engage with these displays, can reinforce how we make meaning towards artefacts.

Sally takes me round the Galleries. She's a busy woman who talks and moves with a certain vibrancy; lanyard swinging, her waist-length grey hair worn loose. I am grateful because she speaks with such clarity and animation.

"As the title says, Multiversity, there isn't just one way, you know? The subtitle of MVG is 'Ways of Knowing'. There's no one way of being and knowing in the world. It's not a universe, it's a multiverse", she explains. She says this passionately, her eyes wide and gleaming. The plaque behind her echoes this, explaining the space "embodies different ways of seeing, knowing and expressing the world, which can widen our understanding of both ourselves and other cultures". It "endeavours to stimulate curiosity and wonder, encourage research, provoke questions and debates, promote tolerance...celebrating our common humanity".

This is consistent with a contemporary museum ideology of forwarding a multivocality of voices and interpretation. The MVG relies on a "making sense" (Classen and Howes 2006: 200) of the world. The MVG is exceptional in that it encourages individual "meaning-making". Silverman (1995) defines this as the "process of negotiation between two parties in which information is created rather than transmitted" (Derwin, 1981 in Silverman, 1995: 161). This is instead of a one-way, didactic and static learning process. By removing carefully curated labels, the MVG deconstructs traditional didactic displays that enforces a singular meaning or interpretation to visitors.

Despite most pieces being contained between a sheet of separating glass, in either cases or drawers, experiential encounters can be found, even if they are discreet. The drawers, for example, adorned with copper handles, offer a physical interaction with artefacts. Pulling them open is exciting - a chance to see what is hidden and uncover what is inside. I notice two five-year-old children running about the static space, giggling and earnestly peaking inside. Sally says she sometimes purposefully leaves a drawer half pulled out. I notice a half-open one on my next solo visit. The temptation to look is unbearable; the curiosity insatiable. I open it all the way to reveal a tiny matchstick-sized totem pole, barely the length of my thumb. Later, Sally informs me it is actually the world's smallest totem pole. It even had its very own raising ceremony. The cases may be crowded and the artefacts innumerable, but I still managed to have a meaningful encounter. It allowed me to not only realise this artefact existed, but gave me the opportunity for inquiry, to which I received a story. The tactility of the drawers offers physical opportunities to engage without directly touching artefacts. These experiences forged a pathway of knowledge that started with me wondering what was hiding inside the bottom drawer.

Learning, in this way, becomes transformative. Paris and Mercer (2002: 401) argue that these encounters have the capacity to change the self. These experiences, or thought processes, can reform or manipulate visitor's ideas, beliefs and perceptions of what they experience. This leads to "confirming, disconfirming or elaborating understanding of their own identity" (2002: 402).

Reflecting on my first MVG visit, the space seemed entirely mad. However, gradually, time allowed me to unpick its messiness. Knowing the space over time transformed how I perceive museum displays. Why is it darker here? I understood it was to protect the weavings. Why are the raven masks' beaks tied shut? I learnt it was to quiet their "chattering". Although my inquiries were inspired by my research, I accumulated a critical awareness that has stuck with me. No longer blissfully unaware, I am attentive that there is more to museum displays than meets the eye. If this awareness could be expanded to visitors, even within their short visits, this could be a powerful, decolonising transformation.

Sally informs me that the MVG's layout is a deliberate "deep idea" to enable visitor transformation through different trajectories of knowledge. There is no one fixed path through the MVG. Allowing the choice of an individual, pedagogic pathway, visitors navigate through

infinite transformative, intellectual possibilities. Theorised as "free-choice learning", the learner chooses "what, how, where and with whom to learn" (Falk 2007: 19 in Schultz, 2011: 8). No two people will stroll down the same sequential corridors or pause at the same things, each visitor's experience will be unique. Their responses and thoughts will flourish independently, based on their encounters or previous knowledge and experiences. Learning in the MVG then becomes entirely processual. One's transformation of perception depends on the drawers you open and the paths you choose.

Thus, the lack of contextualisation and interpretive material fulfils this purpose. A heavily curated space would mean there is less room for your own interpretation. "In normal exhibitions you are led on a pathway, a journey that is led by the curators – that's not supposed to be what's happening here," Sally tells me firmly. These interpretations are not dictated or forced, but rather reliant on curiosity. Although some may not bother to look, those who do will more intimately understand the process than through passively reading an over-edited label. By manipulating these classifications, power is removed from the curator in controlling representation. Bequeathed to the visitor, they form this knowledge themselves: "you can't always lecture people, they kind of have to understand for themselves," Sally says gently.

This removal of control over artefact contextualisation absolves curators of power and, by extension, dissolves MOA's hegemonic structures. These written interpretations risk undermining the artefact itself, when "the actual, real work of communication is done mainly by words, not things" (Dudley, 2012: 3). Curating labels constructs artefact biographies (Dudley, 2012: 2). Mayer (2003) shows these can be aligned by "formalised objectives recognised by the museum as being appropriate and enduring", creating an artificial "reality" of a particular past (2003: 43). Not prescribing these histories through meticulously-created labels gives the visitor more autonomy (Dudley, 2012: 2). However, this proposes a difficulty in delivering specific meanings in spaces like the MVG. How do we send the "right" meanings of Indigenous artefacts through "free choice" learning? How does one contextualise an artefact's value without an entire textual history?

Here, Indigenous collaboration is most valuable. Indigenous input maintains the communication of appropriate, accurate messages. It positions Indigenous people to rightfully represent themselves (Witcomb, 2007). Museums should be critical of their positionality in

constructing artefact biographies, accepting it is not their knowledge to own (Witcomb, 2007: 44). MVG displays require substantial Indigenous (co)curation. Kramer (2015) describes these collaborative relationships as "Mobius museology" (2015: 490). This metaphor shows how these relationships should operate as one. These practices recognise that "blurred boundaries" exist in collections between curators and Indigenous peoples (2015: 506). A loop that circulates endlessly, it features "mutual entanglements" (2015: 506).

One way Mobius Museology is enacted is through adapting artefact display. For example, non-display acts as a statement to highlight an artefacts importance, sacredness and value. Manipulating this calls into question the visitor's own colonial gaze. Sally recalls that when ceremonial masks were previously displayed, Indigenous parents refused to bring their children to MOA as masks should only be seen in ceremony: "now they live wrapped up and put away, not for people to gawk at". Withdrawing ceremonial masks forces an analysis of this display choice. It elicits an awareness and respect of Coast Salish ritual practices. William, a Musqueum curator, expresses the difficulty of representing what is sacred. This challenge characterises a larger history of representing Coast Salish peoples at MOA where their ceremonies are closely protected. However, removing all mention of ceremony altogether would negate the importance, or existence of spiritual practice. Thus, a solution, or midpoint, is formed that acknowledges spiritual artefacts without explicit depiction.

Sally and I come to an empty case. A small plaque sits at the bottom detailing the sacredness of Coast Salish spirituality. I read it slowly, feeling Sally watch me. I look at the blank canvas. "Is the emptiness symbolic?" She smiles, stands back and points: "but it's not empty." Sure enough, a vague silhouette of two blurry figures appear; two people involved in a spiritual ceremony. "You can't actually see but you have a sense there's something there, something you're not invited to be part of." She looks at them contemplatively. "We took an image, blew it up big, coloured it black, softened it by putting it behind a Mylar sheet. It also does something really fascinating…" she elongates "really" as she briskly walks backwards. Confused, I stand dumbfounded, still processing the elaborateness of the curatorial decisions. "The neat thing is, the further you get away from it, the more you can see. The closer you get, the less you see."
I walk away and rightfully; the outlines of the figures are distinct and clearer. The closer you walk towards it, the more the outlines blend into the sheet. Standing right in front of the case, they would be unnoticeable. It signals that the further you intrude, the less you will be allowed

to view. The hidden figures represent a part of life where we cannot interfere. Still physically separated, yet acknowledging existence, a critical message is forwarded to visitors. By not showing it in full but by only hinting, we become aware of its cultural importance. As Sally explains this, a couple eavesdrop and cock their heads, squinting at the case. I watch the older woman smile in delight. Sally's human presence draws people in; the visitors learn and uncover something from overhearing this encounter.

There is something about the quietness of it all. Had Sally not shown me, I would have never noticed. Initially, I was overcome with the idea that everyone should know about this display. However, it is the secretiveness that becomes so fitting, especially given its content. It must be noticed, not shown. Perhaps, it is made for those who look, those who are open to learn. Whilst being respectful to Indigenous beliefs, it still includes non-Indigenous people (albeit the open-minded ones). Simultaneously questioning display politics, it illustrates the importance of appropriate cultural interpretation. Curiously, this recognition comes not from something being shown, but rather, withheld. Paradoxically, the absence of the artefact creates a presence, an impact.

Awareness of culturally-appropriate displays can be manipulated in more explicit examples. The Dzawada'enuxw wolf mask, another withheld artefact, is on display but completely wrapped in cloth. Odd and prominent, with no enclosed case, it catches your eye immediately as it sits unashamedly on a wooden case. The brown cloth maps out the shape and size of the mask but nothing else. Dzawada'enuxw elder Tom Dawson argues it should be displayed so young people have access to knowledge about the mask (Kramer, 2015: 495). In compromise, a mid-point is achieved where visitors understand these artefacts should by-pass aesthetic gazes. Instead, they are reminders of the continuation and connections between living Indigenous groups (2015: 495). A dialogue is created, showing that Indigenous people are active, animated and involved in protecting their spirituality. They are agents in curatorial decisions, not passive victims, and can choose how to be represented. The label concludes with "this is so that the public can understand that not everyone is meant to see these things" (Kramer, 2015: 496-7). The understandings go beyond cultural appropriateness, but act as a reminder of Indigenous involvement. Encompassed within the politics of display, the value of First Nation beliefs is upheld. These examples of withheld artefacts foregrounds not only the

spiritual significance of such practices but the proprietorial ownership First Nations people have of their living cultural heritage.

Figure 5: Wrapped wolf mask on display. Photograph by author.

Despite attempts to create a collaborative Mobius museology, the fundamental control over these spaces is not addressed. Attempts to represent "the Other" will remain shrouded in imperialist implications until ideas underpinning ownership are radicalised completely. This includes control of where artefacts are encountered. Doxtator (1996) explains "learning the principle of respect doesn't imply that you have to have all the knowledge" (1996: 57). Rather, respect comes from appreciating and situating artefacts in correct contexts.

Museums, in an attempt to be educative, informative and learning-based, can ignore or manipulate these contexts and ideas of ownership. Museums are challenged constantly through boundary-work between often marginalised Indigenous cultural groups. Museological literature situates this boundary-work through the idea of a "contact zone"- the "space of imperial encounters…in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into

contact with each other and establish ongoing relations...involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict" (Pratt, 1992: 8). For example, MVG curators offered the Haida people their chance to choose which artefacts they wanted displayed (Shelton, 2011: 394). It was an inclusive act, but the offer remained in the curator's control.

Contact zones should denote exchanges of "ongoing, historical, political, moral relationships" (Clifford, 1997: 192) that show "a reciprocity of people and not just objects" (1997: 195). However, William, tells me Musqueum representatives within major exhibitions appear only as co-curators or guest curators. Contact zones boast of their ability to propose power-sharing but not a total surrendering. The oppressed and oppressor should operate in tandem: "not in terms of separateness but in…co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices" (Pratt, 1992: 8). Although contact zones work to establish collaborative relations, these will always be insufficient. It is paramount to remember these relations are asymmetric and weighted towards the agenda of the establishment (Clifford, 1997). The final decision to power-share lies solely with the institution. It is out of their will that a dialogue and an exchange emerge.

Concluding Thoughts

MOA may attempt to have culturally appropriate displays: the wrapped masks, the removal of sacred objects. It may organise consultation meetings with Musqueum elders and adapt displays. However, it still is in control of regulating and managing these decisions. The mere creation of a dialogue automatically presents institutions as culturally-inclusive, but less attention is garnered on its inherent inequality. Museums are inherently neo-colonial as they gather all means of control: of space, history but most importantly, representation. The moments in which this control is contested is when the museum is actively being decolonised. Therefore, complete decolonisation, if indeed possible, requires an entire revolution of authority structures and reclamation of ownership and control over artefacts. By this logic, MOA can only *attempt* to decolonise its space.

Therefore, if museums cannot decolonise outwardly, then perhaps the space for change lies with the visitors, the encountering parties. Decolonising the museum sphere and the renouncing of authority could happen if this intention was adopted ideologically. It is the potential for visitors to critically receive the space that gives scope for decolonisation. Aside from

decolonising the museum outwardly, which may be more or less impossible, if visitors are able to critique problematic museum practice, decolonisation could happen on the inside, within the mind. Decolonising the museum, can thus happen on an individual, and not an institutional basis. This can be facilitated through "free choice" philosophies of Visible Storage, meanings can form outside the curatorial sphere. It allows more room for individual interpretation and contemplative thought than an ordinary exhibit. This could be an effective decolonising method, handing the reigns to the visitors who enter, allowing people to "meaning-make" in the space.

Perhaps, for now, that is an appropriate goal. Mentioned previously, it is not necessarily the specificities of what you learn, but how you come to that conclusion. It is how you approach these contestations that matters. If you approach them with humility, uncertainty, critique, an acknowledgement that they are not wholly right and that they can continually be improved, a difference emerges. If curators, visitors, and museum directors acknowledge the inherent, inevitable and continual problems within museology and strive to make them more ethical, inclusive, and culturally appropriate, then they recognise a space for progress. Decolonisation can therefore emerge from those who encounter the spaces, by visitors becoming critically aware of their own colonial gaze.

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