

The Humboldt Forum. New Anthropologies for Old Collections

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Next year will mark the completion of the largest and most ambitious cultural project in Europe, the Humboldt Forum located not only in Mitte, the heart of Berlin, but also in the centre of Europe. Because of its location, this new cultural complex exhales outstanding symbolic value not only for Germany but also, through the expression of contemporary, relevant and enlightened aspirations and values, for a Europe whose ideals are currently under attack from populism. Describing the cultural mission of the three partner institutions – the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Zentral- und Landesbibliothek and the Humboldt-Universität, Martin Heller noted: “The new institution seeks to turn mere cohabitation into coexistence by establishing shared binding objectives for all participants as well as framework for action in which individual strengths can be brought to bear as a coherent overall profile.” It was said in 2013, at a time when the project itself was hotly under debate, that Angela Merkel wanted only for the new building to be bigger than the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. At the same time, some art historians claimed that the project would revitalize Enlightenment ideals and values closely associated with Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, - a situation which if true might be widely contested by many Indigenous people. The curators of the Forum’s forerunner, the Museum Für Völkerkunde, which despite its massive building and extensive collections was hidden away in the suburb of Dahlem, on the other hand, worried about the size and dimensions of their new apartments and whether they would prove sufficient to contain one of the largest ethnographic and Asian collections in the world. Between national pride, intellectual nostalgia and curatorial logistics, popular debate in Germany focused on the symbolic meaning of reconstructing the Baroque Prussian Royal Palace; a building intimately connected with Prussian militarism that had been heavily bombed in the Second World War before being demolished in 1950 and replaced by the modernist glazed facade of the Palast der Republik, the East German Parliament. The idea to rebuild the Prussian Royal Palace and reconstitute it as the Humboldt Forum divided modernists from historicists, reopened old ideological divisions and fractured the sometime-uneasy relationship between former West and East Germany, without considering the intellectual and museological merits of the proposed project. Clearly, the rebuilding of the Palace fulfilled the project to reconstruct the monumental centre of Berlin after the massive destruction of World War II, but the political and historical debates long eclipsed discussion on the purpose the reconstructed palace would serve.

The construction of a new home to reunites the ethnographic and Asian collections previously displayed in Dahlem, with the rest of the Prussian State Collections situated on Spree Island, will also bring the museum into intimate relationship with the state library and the Humboldt University creating an unparalleled institution. The position of these collections in the centre of Berlin importantly asserts the equality of world cultures and their centrality to a multicultural European Union while acknowledging difference as a source of creative growth and the aspiration towards reconciliation, tolerance and understanding between the world’s diverse peoples. Effectively, the Forum will constitute a portal to the world’s diverse cultures that will

benefit both German and European political bodies.ⁱ While it goes without saying that a portal is a connecting device, in this case between the German state and European Union with cultures across the globe, it needs be borne in mind that the ensuing programs of mediation between the points it connects may be inflected by the historical circumstances of the Forum's inception, which hide as many conceits and tensions as they do promises of a new and distinguishing political culture and cultural politics. I will briefly discuss just some of these major institutional fault-lines which, given the focus of preliminary debates, may not have been given the importance they deserve in considering the fulfillment of the huge potential contained in such a unique organization of this type.

The purpose of a portal "a door, gate, doorway, or gateway of stately or elaborate construction" (1979, Vol II, The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, p. 2244) is to provide an interchange between those within and outside an institution, nation or social and cultural groups through a convergence of different and sometimes contradictory and even oppositional networks. A portal is not therefore unlike a hub, hive or locus as, in the case of cultural, artistic and intellectual institutions, which promote the flow of ideas and expressions as they are networked within and between different communities. Networks have very different constitutions and serve varied purposes, even when closely related. They may serve overlapping global, national, or local organizations and communities, but similarities of purpose should not lead to the assumption of uniformity in their reach or adoption. All museums are the locus of a wide range of professional curatorial, conservation, educational and administrative networks. In addition, they share academic and research networks and are part of larger organizational structures, which, in the case of Germany include a state integrated museum network such as, in the case of the Humboldt Forum, the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz. Many of these different types of networks are conservative and are enabling rather than changative structures, but contradictory and alternative networked institutions and communities should be embraced instead of rejected or perceived as dysfunctional, and re-interpreted as creative agencies and challenges, which add to an institution's contemporaneity and relevance. After all, with digital media it is impossible to insulate a portal from conflictual networks and those acting within organizations now freely draw from a wide range of digitally connected networks which always limits the effective hegemonic functionality of old established institutions.

One such largely digitally based network is that developed by the Ugandan scholar Paul Wangoola and his Goan colleague, Claudio Alvares. Despite the common claim that museums have undergone or are undergoing a process of decolonization, Wangoola and Alvares argue that such claims are premature as long as institutions operate according to Western knowledge paradigms and ingrained epistemologies. Colonization was not only a political, economic and physical historical process, but an epistemological project which rejected, demeaned and replaced local knowledge systems geared to a distinct geographical, biological, and spiritual ecology, with Western universalized epistemologies and their associated knowledges. Colonization exists at an international level, but as Gonzalez Cassanova recognises, pluricultural nation-states continue to exert strong exploitative bonds between ethnicities and classes. This internal colonization continues to be strongly felt especially in Portuguese, Spanish and British

settler states and similarly imposes its own epistemology and systems of classification and knowledge on those it afflicts. Wangoola and Alvares in calling for a decolonization of knowledge, advocate the development of a “reverse anthropology” capable of relativizing, situating and revealing the positionality and limitations of Western Knowledge and therefore changing the exhibition paradigms at play in museums and galleries.

There are inequalities between portals and nowhere are these more apparent than between national or regional state funded museums and their provincial, local, community and university based equivalent which, if harboring smaller collections, nevertheless carry out a similar purpose of incubating creativity, curiosity and expressing relations between individuals and communities with the world. The German federal system has notable advantages over say the Canadian system which with its largest collections concentrated in an additional level of national museums actively discriminates against the wider sharing of art and culture. Canadian national museums receive separate and exclusive federal funding and until recently operated as relatively autonomous institutions independent of community mandates. They compete with provincial, local and other museums for regional acquisitions, offer limited partnership agreements, and operate no satellite institutions through which to share their collections over Canada’s 9,984,670 km. These elite intuitions, five out of seven of which are in the national capital, form a consortium, which mainly attempts to create a highly concentrated national museum network along a ceremonial procession-way comparable to the Smithsonian Institution and Mall in Washington D.C.

The German museum system is more dispersed with major collections located in every state capital and major city. Germany provides a culturally integrated model of a nation state that equitably distributes access to arts and cultures. Nevertheless, the Humboldt Forum raises new responsibilities and obligations regarding its relationship to outside Indigenous cultures. In Canada, there is a disjuncture between museum collections, which are mainly concentrated in cities within a hundred kilometres of the US border and Indigenous sources of expertise, which are often isolated in the north. Nevertheless, the distance between Berlin and Damascus, Istanbul, or Ranua are not so different as those between Vancouver and Haida Gwaii, Kodiak, or Cape Dorset, making differences in the perceived relative isolation between metropolitan cities and museums with Indigenous peoples largely illusory. Moreover, the internet and digital media has made geographic distance inconsequential and the rights and obligations that Indigenous peoples are asking of metropolitan Canada are similar to those they will ask of Germany and the European community. One of the most urgent necessities and ethical obligations museums have therefore, is to circulate collections more widely and increase our capacity to enable much greater Indigenous curation both of domestic and foreign exhibitions. By acknowledging Indigenous knowledge systems and their right to self- representation and by bringing together Indigenous knowledge holders and institutional collections, museums can transform themselves into more open institutions. Much of the above is implicit in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), signed the same year by Germany and by Canada in 2016. The instrument confers obligations on its signatories to undertake ample consultation on all issues that impact Indigenous people. It acknowledges the value and integrity of Indigenous knowledge systems and returns the control of Indigenous

heritage and its interpretation back to the communities of origin. It is no longer enough therefore, to work collaboratively with Indigenous peoples over one specific project or exhibition, but to return the responsibility for collections back to the groups from which they derive. UNDRIP represents the minimum acceptable conditions required for the restoration of the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples and will probably require in some cases to be supplemented by customary law. This should not be a cause for consternation in the museum community, but instead an opportunity to reform the wider relations between peoples, collections and institutions. There is wide acceptance in Canada among museum directors that not enough has been done to train Indigenous peoples for senior museum management positions. Moreover, the Alberta Museums Association and the British Columbia Museums Association have recognized that ownership rights of Indigenous collections reside with the communities of origin. In both provinces museums, source communities and traditional knowledge holders are increasingly working together in ways that suggest provincial and local museums, collections and stakeholders are re-articulating the relationship between their different constituencies. Taken together, the necessity to build capacity, employ greater numbers of Indigenous staff and empower them over the care, management and mobilization of collections provides a form of restorative justice, which can transform networks and their implicit power relations and radically transform the nature of portals like the Humboldt Forum and museums elsewhere. The internationalisation of staff, which is a fundamental requirement of reconfiguring museums, can be accomplished through succession planning and revisions to job descriptions, which at MOA, for Asian curators and programmers now include language competencies. Criteria might also include community or academic certification of traditional knowledge holders, and skill holders, all of whom need training in established museum methods and critical museology to help them establish new and transformative practices. The repatriated museum is a museum of many knowledges and ways of seeing, and of representing the world. It is a museum that seeds and cultivates relationships between different types of museums and institutions, it is critical and relevant and values the ethnic heterogeneity and cultural diversity of its staff and governance body and acknowledges that diverse linguistic communication strategies are fundamental to fulfilling a multi-cultural or pluri-cultural mandate.

Museum portals exchange large amounts of diverse information and opinions concerning repatriation. It is clear that objects can be used for establishing or negating relationships making digital and physical portals key to encouraging positive new relationships. Partnership and the ability to create and sustain close and honest relations that value common humanity over cultural or historical specificity is fundamental to repatriation. There are at least three well documented repatriation processes that have been initiated from British Columbia that if better known, might weaken established dispositions against the process: the repatriation of T'xwelátse, a transformation stone from the Burke Museum, Seattle to its home community of Stó:lō in the Frazer Valley of British Columbia; the repatriation of the G'psgolox pole from the National Museum of Ethnology in Stockholm to the Haisla Nation, Kitamaat, British Columbia and the return of human remains from museums around the world to Skidegate and Old Massett in Haida Gwaii. The strategies and history of the return was very different in all three cases, but the moral arguments, relationships, and the mutual benefits deriving from the

conversion of tangible into intangible cultural heritage, in every case, were remarkably similar. All cases were conducted over large time-spans, allowing for the creation of new relationships and changes in attitudes. The repatriation of 600 Haida ancestors housed in disrespectful and culturally inappropriate museum storage units, resulted in a community healing process which through their transfer into cedar boxes to be brought home, funeral services, feeding, and burial in special sections of the cemeteries in Skidegate and Old Massett, reconnected them to land and families; the return of the G'psgolox pole performed a similar function, returning authority over cultural artifacts to the Haisla and rescoring family ownership rights over stories. In the short term, the repatriation brought a new copy of the repatriated pole, carved by master carver Henry Robinson, to the Museum and opened networks connecting schools in Stockholm with that in Kitamaat. The return of T'xwelátse resulted in an exhibition, *Man Turned to Stone*, curated between Stó:lō traditional knowledge holders and Scott Marsden, the curator of the Reach Gallery, in the nearby community of Abbotsford, and a tour of T'xwelátse to other museums. All cases lead to a generous and free sharing of knowledge and better understanding of Indigenous epistemologies that link land, knowledge and peoples and contextualize repatriation as a process of healing and reformation of communities. Western museums sometimes make the error of approaching repatriation as divorced from other processes and relationships between them and communities and individuals. This results in fears of one way outward flow of tangible heritage but as the three cases above demonstrate, repatriation involves exchanges in which tangible is exchanged for beneficial intangible heritage. In some cases building this level of confidence results in two way flows of tangible heritage such as, has been experienced at MOA which in recent years has been the beneficiary of two major NWC collections given by First Nations families. Moreover, relations established through repatriation and other engagements have led to loans such as the mountain goat moon chest from the American Museum of Natural History to the Haida Nation: the exchange of exhibitions on the potlatch collection and European porcelain between Alert Bay U'mista Cultural Centre and the Saxon State Museums, and the loan of masks to participate in potlatch ceremonies from MOA to Alert Bay and elsewhere. Repatriation and the host of relations they engender between communities and museums is an important and central process mediated always in different ways but with a common propensity to establish new working relationships, expand knowledge and intercultural understanding and rebalance former asymmetrical relationships that still stand at the centre of European and Canadian human rights policies. While most communities do not want the complete return of all collections once belonging to them, museums should be proactive in working for repatriation of specific categories of objects as determined through mutual negotiations. Building new relations through repatriation and related processes may even be the only ethical way Indigenous collections will be kept by museums.

Opening museums to new sources of knowledge inevitably raises questions of the adequacy of Western 18th and 19th century disciplinary based knowledge systems for a planetary community. The 'reverse anthropology' that Wangoola and Alvares and others have advocated has already begun to have been developed through critical theory, ethnographies, and critical histories of Western institutions, fieldwork and travel writing and ethnographic description. Most Institutions with the exception of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, the House der Kulturen de Welt, Berlin, Documenta, and biennales, uphold established disciplinary based knowledge

institutions. However, pockets of resistance have sparked and continue to emerge from new versions of the traditional ethnographic museums. When UBC MOA was founded in 1949, anthropology still held a monopoly over the study of culture. By the time, the museum moved from the cluttered basement of the University Library, anthropology was beginning to lose this monopoly. The new art history, critical theory, cultural studies, cultural geography, history of science, intellectual history and more recently Queer and gender studies, Indigenous studies and post-colonialism have grown to contest anthropology's monopoly over the study of culture while at the same time critiquing basic presuppositions, its limited criticality, epistemology and its relation to its subject. Anthropology has reacted through fragmenting itself and in the US and Anglo-Canada through doubting the credibility of an epistemologically disunified four field approach. Elsewhere where anthropology was always limited to cultural or social anthropology, the discipline has divided along critical and empiricist orientations. Museums holding ethnographic collections must now choose between following an established disciplinary based anthropology or moving its area of operations, to a broader raft of mainly emergent disciplines, including critical anthropology, which I have elsewhere identified with what I call the "anthropological imagination". This will be a hard decision for new institutions with old collections, but one which will help decide their contemporary intellectual and ethical relevance; their ability to establish new and transformative relationships with originating communities, and in the long run the very acceptability and prudence and moral bearing of Europe as a political-ethical construction.

ⁱ This symbolism is matched only by the Mexican Government locating the new Museum of Memory and Tolerance next to the new Department of Foreign Relations also in the very centre of its capital city.

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