De-Colonizing Art Institutions

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Let's get radical

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Let's get radical!
Thoughts on de-colonizing European museum collections

How can we imagine the ethnographic museums of the future? What might a de-colonized museum collection consist of?

On a recent trip to London I visited the British Museum for the first time in over 10 years. Since my earlier visits as a young woman I have immersed myself in post and de-colonial theories so I approached the museum with a de-colonial lens. Despite this I was profoundly shocked at the immediate sense of sadness and pain I felt oozing out of pristine showcases stuffed with imperial booties; a showcase of the British Empire and all those that were subjected to their violent, colonial oppression. The entire building and the vast collection radiating with this violence. I was left with a heavy feeling of sorrow and despair - how can such a museum still exist that so proudly covets objects and human remains that were more often than not stolen or unethically traded? Can it still be valid to have such a museum so obviously grounded in deep colonial violence and inequality? Have we Europeans still not looked deeply enough in the mirror to confront our ugly brutal past? To acknowledge the utter violence and human tragedy that our colonial projects have wreaked on humanity, let alone to try and make reparations for the incredible damage to cultures not our own? I began thinking how I would feel being here in this museum if I was not a white Australian-German woman but rather a member of one of the peoples whose objects were so carelessly displayed here? I spoke about this with a good friend of mine, another white Australian, who told me a fascinating story revolving around this same thought - she had visited the Musee de Quai Branly, the French Empire equivalent to the British Museum, with a Papua New Guinean friend of hers and was deeply disturbed when on viewing one particular section of the museum her friend saw an object from her homeland that according to Papua New Guinean custom women were not allowed to see. A small but poignant example of the utter insensitivity involved in the handling and display of these vast colonially acquired ethnographic collections, which brings me to the main focus of this piece - how might we radically de-colonize ethnographic museums?

So, let's get radical! Let's empty the cases, let's stop displaying "others" as if they belonged to us, let's reflect rather on ourselves and the brutality of how and why these collections came to exist and in doing so reflect on the brutality of a colonial past that reverberates deeply into the (colonial) present - let's acknowledge our roles as the perpetrators of deep inhuman injustices and represent that self to the world, rather than

proudly displaying the violent imperial treasures that fill our European museums. *Let's de-colonize the museums!*

I would like to now outline some concrete proposals for how I would envisage such a radical de-colonialization of ethnographic museums happening within our immediate future:

1. Repatriate all human remains unconditionally
Rather than going through lengthy complicated bureaucratic procedures, in which the peoples whose ancestors remains are held in collections need to apply individually to have their own people's remains returned, European museums with collections of human remains should actively seek to contact and repatriate all the human remains in their collections through consultation with the affected source communities. Instead of adding insult to colonial injury by requiring affected peoples to ask for their own remains to be returned, European museums should be pro-active in amending for the violence and unethical acquisition of such remains by taking the responsibility for repatriation upon themselves.

2. Active consultation with source communities about repatriation of objects
Again European museums should take the impetus on themselves to establish relationships with source communities where their collections provenance from and to actively engage with these communities on whether or not they would like objects returned to them. If so desired by source communities, then this should be done unconditionally, if not desired, then the context in which these objects were acquired should be visibly reflected and contextualized to accompany any display of the objects themselves. Let's tell it how it is - how it was collected, why it was collected, who collected it and for what purposes.

3. Fund museums or "keeping places" in source communities
An excuse often used by many European museums, who often understand themselves as the keepers of world cultural heritage, for not returning objects to source communities is that they are concerned it will not be properly conserved or looked after if given back and will therefore represent a loss to world culture. Aside from the obviously patronizing and insulting colonial belief embedded in this attitude it is not for European museums to impose their own knowledge systems or values on source communities, who may have different systems of knowledge and value-attribution. Once source communities have had objects repatriated to them, it is for them to determine what they do with it. With this in mind however European museums (and the state itself), when desired by source communities, could fund museums or "keeping places" for returned objects in the source communities themselves. To my mind this would act as a form of reparation for centuries of plundering and desecration of objects and remains.

4. Re-name museums to reflect their true nature
There has been a vogue in both Europe and North America over the past 20 or so years to rename ethnographic museums in order to try and reflect both this notion of being keepers of the world's cultural heritage as well as to change the more awkward former names. For example in German speaking countries what were formerly "Völkerkunde"

(literally study of peoples) museums are often re-named as Museen der Kulturen or Museen der Welt Kulturen - Museum of Cultures or Museums of World Culture. Why don't we radically re-name them instead to reflect what a lot of these ethnographic museums really are? How about Museum of Colonial Ethnography? Museum of Colonial Sciences? Museum of the Colonial Other? Museum of our Colonial Pasts? This could be interesting here within Switzerland especially, as the commonly heard expression "But Switzerland had no colonies" would finally have to be reflected to represent the true nature of the provenance of the majority of the collections in ethnographic museums here - it might not have had colonies, but it was colonial!

5. Make founding stories of museums visible

Let's get radically transparent, rather than in the token way in which many European museums try and reflect on their own history. Let's tell it how it really is. How these collections were acquired and under what sort of conditions. Who paid for the museum to be funded and how was that money acquired? Which people collected each object and how did they collect it? In what context were the objects collected and how was the museum involved in this context? Let's talk about how sadistically wrong colonial empires were and are, about the violence that accompanies a lot of the objects in museums collections as well as objects provenance from colonial empires or entanglements, let's tell the stories about the grave robbings, the plunderings, the contract killings and scientific racism attached to the collection of skulls and skeletons of non-Europeans, let's lay it all bare and confront the very existence of ethnographic museums.

6. Represent the self rather than the "Other"

Ethnographic museums should stop collecting any new objects before they have dealt with the problematic provenances of those already in their collections. After actively creating relationships with source communities and repatriating unconditionally any desired human remains and objects to those communities I can imagine the vast warehouses and showcases might be a lot barer than they are now. This would provide a new opportunity to reflect exactly upon that emptiness and what has provoked it. Namely the unethical and violent acquisition of so many objects and human remains and their contemporary repatriation. Then perhaps we could turn the ethnographic museums of the future into places of real education again, one of their initial founding missions, by using these de-colonized museum collections to self-reflect and represent *ourselves*. We could reflect on the violent injustices of the European colonial project, on European scientific racism and its intertwining with the evolution of many natural sciences such as ethnography etc., the scientists/explorers/adventures that collected and founded these museums. In doing so we can transform the ethnographic gaze back onto ourselves, rather than towards the Other that it has been focused on for far too long.

In the near future I would love to return to the British Museum and see empty cases with labels telling the stories of how objects were originally stolen or dubiously traded and how they were given back, to see cases full of the personal objects that belonged to colonial explorers, anthropologists, adventurers, traders, to see exhibitions that tell the story of imperial colonialism and how dreadfully wrong it was. Wouldn't that be radical….

Sally Schonfeldt